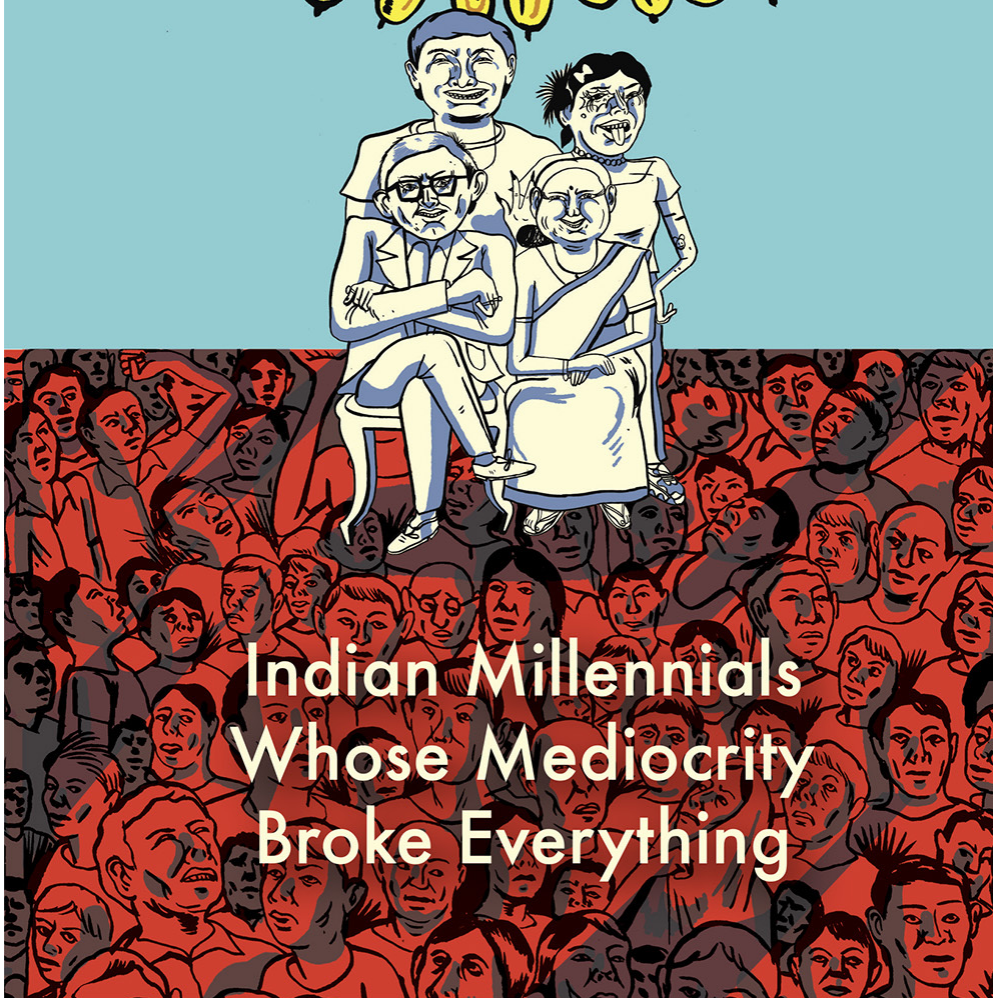
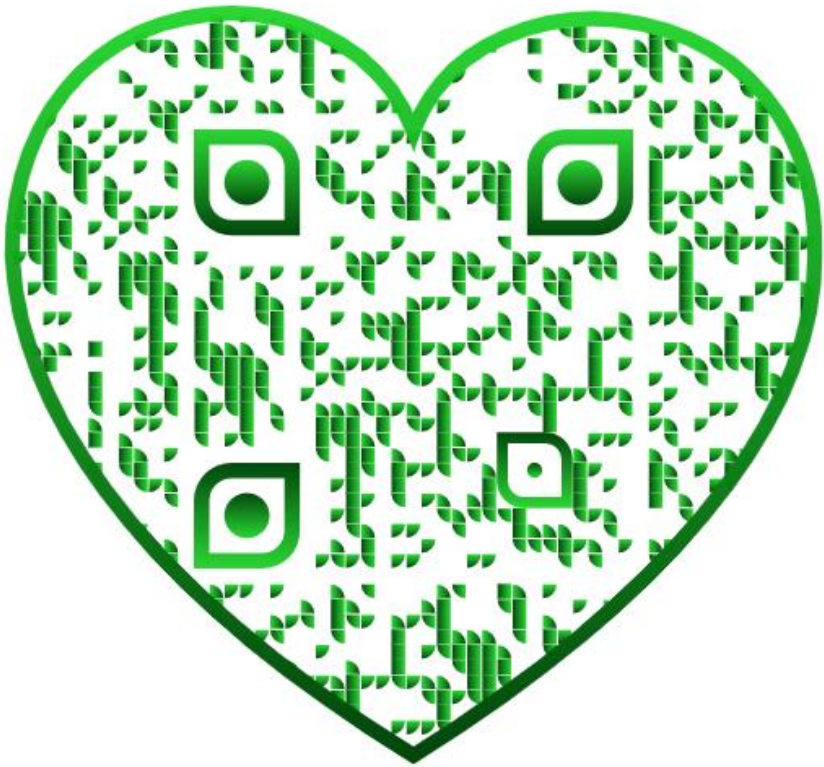
RAVIKANT KISANA

MEET THE SAVARNAS



Indian Millennials Whose Mediocrity Broke Everything



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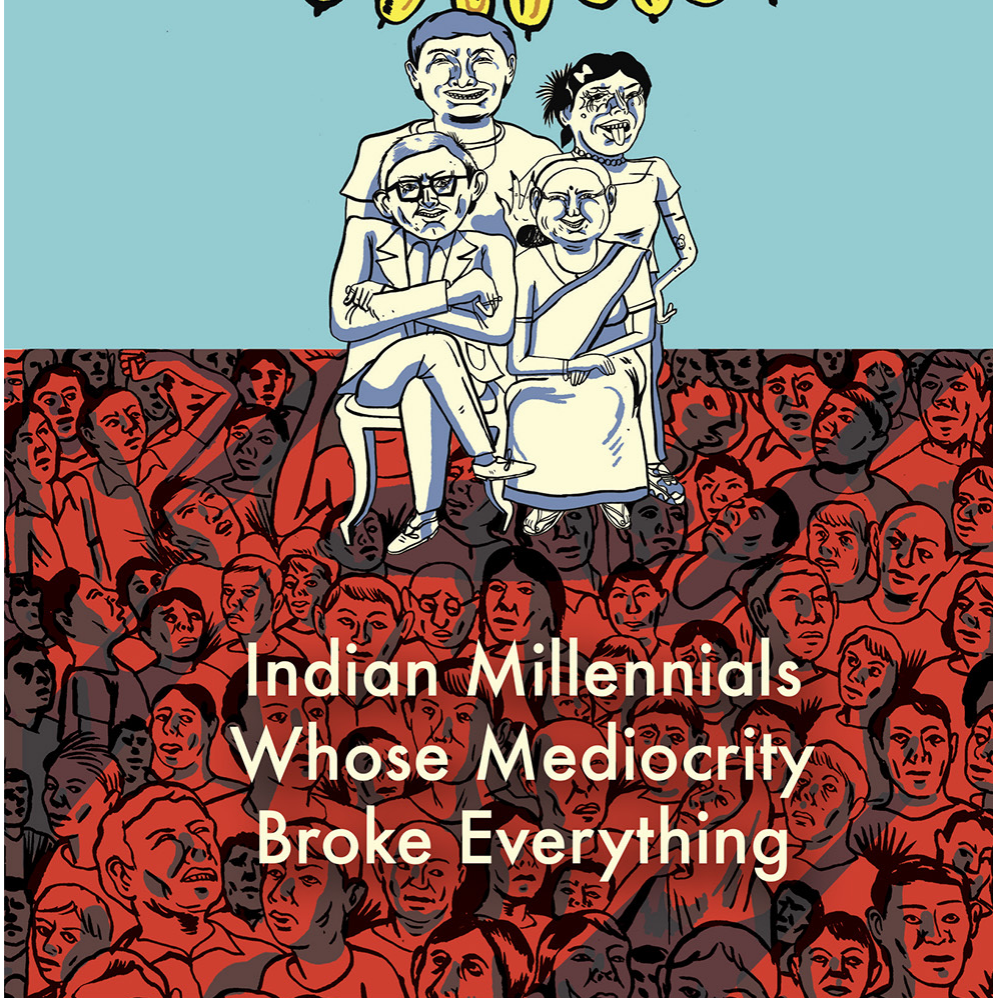

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For,
all the versions and fractions of me that had to die for me to become the person who could write this work.

You were all good and valid

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Prologue

Like most introductory works on a subject, this is neither the first thought on this subject nor is my work original in its entirety. At best, this is an attempt at collating all the different threads of articulations, expressions, sighs and smiles and tears, and all manner of utterances—public and private—by a million lived realities all at once. In that attempt as well, most likely this is nowhere close to doing any of it any justice. Irrespective, this work positions itself as an 'introduction'—to the savarnas. They are usually tolerant of a lot of mediocrity posing as intellectual work, so I am hoping some of that generosity will bleed over to my endeavour as well (flawed as it is).

With the editorial arrogance possible only in the first book of an author not yet humbled by continuous public scrutiny from readers and reviewers, I have attempted, foolhardily, to document and narrativize the pathologies of the hyper-visible yet perennial blind spot that is the world of elite 'savarnas', who critique everyone and everything but never themselves. No matter what method I use, this venture is doomed to fail in many savarna eyes. They will inevitably find clever and creative ways to dismantle its mediocrity in ways that I cannot imagine. This is because the savarnas, especially educated elites, are used to being experts on everything. From college teens who troll from behind anonymous IDs to university professors, from techies to finance bros to woke social justice warriors to neo-fascist trolls—they are used to being the pundits. The final word on a subject. They are not used to reading about themselves. Especially when framed by someone who is not one of their own—by one who is 'below' them. As a result, nothing causes them to unravel faster than seeing a non-savarna critically talking about them. So, it is natural to assume this reckless adventure of mine will draw bile and vitriol that my therapy bills surely will be unable to keep up with.

My only advice to the reader—especially if you are a marginalized caste person—is to stay clear of that kind of loaded discussion, lest it blows you apart. You will be dismissed as an apologist, a liar, a

misogynist, queerphobic, unsound in theory, bereft of nuance and buried under pompous academic names, quotes and books. It is not worth it. Let the savarnas read this work, digest it, introspect or seethe—this prologue and book introduce them to their own selves. If they do not like what they meet, it is their internal matter. And if you are a non-savarna who feels the need to 'defend' the savarna position(s) that I have critiqued—let me just say, in anticipation, that I respect your voice but humbly beg for my space to say my own piece. I know I have paid enough of a price in my personal life to reach this point where I can say what I want, so let me just have that minor victory. Please and thank you.

I do not think there has ever been a mainstream cultural commentary on savarna elites in India before. They own everything. They run everything. Including the publishing firm that is printing this book. I am surprised my words have reached this far. I keep hearing a voice at the back of my head telling me that it will all get shut down at any moment. And I keep screaming back at it to let them try. I will keep shouting because they cannot kill me. I died a long time ago—in 2020. I just did not have the rope that night. It was the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown, and my own savarna students had hounded me to the point of annihilation. I remember that night. I remember trying to fashion a rope by cutting the straps of my backpack. I remember laughing ghoulishly at my folly. Maybe it would have been simpler if I had just jumped off the roof. Maybe words do not mean anything. Maybe they mean everything. I remember Rohith Vemula. I remember some of the last words he wrote:

The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.

I can never be as articulate as my brother Rohith, but I know I died that night. And something else was born to take my place. A man, a phantasm, a beast, a buffalo … a drifting piece of cultural flotsam.

Irrespective, it is all very scary. The prospect of public scrutiny, public evisceration, the common trial presided over by my own people, hand-picked and in service of the savarna overlords I offend.

Dear reader, it is fine. I know the costs. Protect yourself. Read the words—if they make sense to you, cherish them, repeat them and celebrate them. If they don't, remember they were blasphemous to begin with, written by a dead man on dead pages. Just don't put yourself in the line of fire. There is nothing I want less than for any reader of mine to find herself cut down to pieces while trying to defend it. Let it be. Let them be.

When I was a child, especially when there was thunder or when I was otherwise terrified, I'd hide under the bed or behind a door, and it felt almost like I was inside a closet. It was a good place to go into because from there, I could look upon things without being seen myself. Writing a book is the opposite of that feeling. It is a process of making myself visible to everyone and all things. Yet, even as I write these words, I lock myself up in a closet.

And from there, I wish the readers well. Read with caution. All the best.

* * *

1

What Is a Savarna?

1

'Is Ravikant "really" writing a book?' she asked.

She grew up in a liberal Deshastha Brahman household. Kulkarni. *Kul* (family/community) + *karnika* (recorder/archivist). Writers of words and keepers of history—it was an important administrative job, a cog in the precolonial bureaucracy of the *Peshwai* of the Chitpawan Brahman family, which became the de facto head of the Maratha confederacy in eighteenth-century India.

Apart from Deshastha Brahmans, other literate communities, such as Karhade Brahmans or Kayasthas (notably Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu, or CKP), also handled similar roles in the region for generations, going back hundreds of years that we know of.[1] Literacy was a family business. You were born into words.

She liked saying that she had grown up around books. She 'loved to read', adding quickly, 'but sadly, I don't get time to read as much these days'. She is part trope, part person. Scores of young women like her walk through the halls of literature studies departments in prominent Indian universities and colleges. Fans of Jane Austen and Taylor Swift, who joke about how they will remain unemployable due to their literature degree. Even as she shifts gears and later evolves into chasing corporate dreams in stifling formal wear, safe within her peer circles rests her private reputation as a 'girl who reads'. A bookshelf—small but cute, adorned with aesthetic knick-knacks—stands as a monument to her 'intellectual' credentials. A 'reader' of books.

She was not alone. She came from a long line of book readers. Her father read books. Her mother read books. Even her grandfather read books. Books were *serious* and not meant for random people. In their

culture, in that milieu, books were among a series of items and performances that certified a 'higher' status. A 'higher' kind of person. A *serious* person, meant for *serious* things—unlike people who were not from books, who were understood to be living 'lesser' lives, mean and uncultured lives, rough and simpler lives. Unfortunate beings, intellectual toddlers who had to be taken care of and scolded, even, because they simply were not *serious* enough to understand the deeper truths of life.

Kulkarni was just trying to live up to her name and cultural inheritance. Her father, though well situated himself, had instilled within the family a deep performance of financial precarity. This was why, in her own words, she had entered the 'rat race for money because my family needs it—we don't have anything'. But that was not true. There were substantial assets owned and inherited by the family, enough for them not to have to worry about survival. Regardless, they still identified as 'middle class', often prefixing the word 'lower' before it. Wealth—its lack or accumulation—was seemingly immaterial to their identity formation, for they got their pride from somewhere else, some other realm. An ethereal realm above the mundane and ordinary. Anyone could earn money. But *seriousness* was a family business. Of *serious* matters. Of, among other things, books.

'Ravikant?' she checks again. 'What is he even writing on?' She knew me vaguely, but she had not met many people like me. I was neither a person nor a trope. I was something that did not add up. My family did not read books. In fact, most could not read books. I had tried to blend in with the 'book-readers' in college but was patronizingly dismissed as a simpleton, a lumpen—an ungainly, abominable interloper in what was supposed to be a circle of self-actualized 'deep' poetry types and 'serious readers'. In other words, I was not born into words, and it showed. To be fair to Kulkarni, she was generally pleasant to me, but by and large, our worlds did not overlap. I was not the *serious* type.

Thinking of her, I am reminded of another moment that occurred years into my career as a professor of cultural studies when I ran into a different Kulkarni—another *serious* fellow, a colleague, who, on more than one occasion, lost his temper at me for reasons he himself was not entirely clear about. He apologized once, saying he had anger

issues. Maybe he did. Or maybe it was less about the anger and more about what I triggered. I had trespassed into the *serious* world. An interloper. An imposter. I was not born into words. How was I teaching students? Like him. In ways that were absolutely unlike him. I did not know the way. I did not know anything. A personal affront. A stain. No one he knew in his academic circles had ever heard of me, *he* had never heard of me. How, then, could I have been legitimate? I was not from *his* world, *their* world. The world of words and books and *serious* people.

This whole thing was not about Kulkarnis in particular. It was about all of *them*. Kulkarni girls and boys, Desais and Deshpandes, Chatterjees and Bannerjees, Iyers and Iyengars, Mishras, Joshis and Tripathis, Dixits and Dubeys—and all their kin and all their *kuls*, too numerous to name individually but collectively saying the same lines, shaking their heads, smirking—sometimes patronizing, sometimes feigning indifference. They all spirit into my consciousness—from my past, my present and as phantom book critics and Gen Z influencers from the future. Every one of them, all together, questioning my licence to speak and write words. I was not born into words. I had no right.

What did I know that was worth sharing in words printed in 'real' books sold at airports and posh café-bookstores, talked about in their literary circles full of esoteric journalists, writer-artist types and other species of *serious* peoples? They asked me what would I even write about? What did I know?

Not much, truly.

2

I spent my early years in the dump that is the Tangra region of Calcutta. Adjacent to it is Topsia. These hideous twin tumours on the city's eastern periphery are two giant, grotesque, squalid settlements that were home to some of the most densely overpopulated, marginalized communities. Calcutta had many such tumours, and yet, somehow, even today, the city exists in the popular imagination as a cultured, colonial ruin with fish-loving, Bengali-speaking people who all sing Rabindra Sangeet and discuss Marx at the chai shop *adda*.

The Calcutta I grew up in was a little different. Bangla had to

compete with Hindi–Urdu. Mutton and beef had equal, if not more, fans than fish. I did not hear anyone discussing Marx at any chai shop. Bollywood and Bangla cinema music were more popular in the shanties and slums, where no one cared for Rabindra Sangeet.

There were Muslim immigrants from Bihar (and what is now Jharkhand), who had come to the city three generations ago to work in the giant leather tanneries that, in the days of my youth, were closing down and in the process of being relocated outside the city. There were Oriya and Assamese folks. Nepalis. There were also a few wealthy Punjabi khatris, Bania Gujaratis and Sindhis who lived clustered together in the flats of three-storeyed buildings because they had not yet moved into posher neighbourhoods because gated communities were not popular yet.

There were tribal Christian *bastis*, where the boys had 'English names' like Alan and Anthony. There was a girl in my school whose name was Santa Rita. We all called her 'Panta'—short for 'Panta Bhat', a dish that was basically repurposed rice that only the poorest would eat. Now, Instagram's posh food influencers tell me that 'Panta Bhat' is an exotic, must-have dish. If only Santa Rita had known because she hated being called that. When I last met her, she had changed her name to 'Poornima', so there was no scope for such name-calling.

The school we all went to was operational only till class five, since by then, most people either went elsewhere to study or dropped out entirely. Close by was a daily informal market called 'Chamra Haat' (Leather Market), where the footwear produced in adjacent sweatshops was displayed on folding beds for local and wholesale purchases. Many of my classmates ended up in that trade. Others were swallowed by the criminal underground, which always felt like it was very near and not in some distant, Anurag Kashyap-ian cinematic imagination. Our worlds blurred and overlapped.

Once, when I was in late high school, I found my old classmate Jamal serving beer at an illegal 'dance bar' where another friend and I had snuck in. The three of us, united in the absurdity of our interaction, laughed about our childhood days. He was earning money to go study/work in the 'hotel management industry' somewhere in Dubai. Everyone had a plan. Everyone had a hustle. Education was also a hustle or it was nothing. It was not an idyllic pursuit or a personal exploration or journey. If—and this was always an 'if'—you

studied beyond basic schooling, you studied subjects that got you a job. You read books that 'improved' you—self-help books. Not *serious* books.

My father, who had taught himself broken English, read only organic chemistry books to learn how to better the chemical process of the blue pigment he manufactured in his small, sweatshop-like *karkhaana*. The pigment went into the blue straps of the rubber hawai chappals or flip-flops that were made in the neighbouring Topsia and sold in numerous chamra-haat-style markets in the city.

He must have clocked over a 1,00,000 kilometres between Topsia and Tangra, shuttling around on his rundown, rusting Bajaj scooter held together more by prayer than bolts.

I knew the pigment was called copper phthalocyanine blue-alpha, but I never truly learnt its formulation. It had something to do with ammonia, sulphuric acid and a few other compounds—all of which smelled hideous, were dangerously unsafe and against regulations, and were dumped callously into the common drains of the city.

My father later developed a habit of buying computer magazines because he realized (correctly) that they were the future. He would pore over them for hours, trying to read the English, underlining and double-underlining difficult words as he tried to keep up with the developments in RAM, chipsets and operating systems, in the hope that his kids would 'learn' the computer hustle and get in on the next big thing. (Spoiler: we didn't.)

We lived—or rather, squatted illegally—in a flat whose rent, to this day, goes to the office of the rent controller of the West Bengal government. This is how we were able to a pay rent of only a few hundred rupees while the market price, even back then, was many times that.

The cost of saving money was paid in dignity. The landlord was very displeased and, for years, tried to stop the water supply, cut off the electricity and limit our movements in and out. Having the police check in for some issue or the other, being locked out of the building at night and conserving every mug of water became second nature for us—it was bitter living, but better than moving into budget-appropriate housing, a prospect that would inevitably have been far more distressing and precarious.

Almost every member of my extended Punjabi family had slipped

into debt around that time and eventually ran away from the debtors, from Calcutta, back to the village. The city had spat them all out. All except us. We stubbornly clung on and threw roots—even if temporary—into the asphalt soil of the metropolis. Survival was the priority.

When I was in the sixth standard, my parents somehow got me admitted into a good English-medium, CBSE-curriculum school run by Banias. Here, I discovered a completely new universe of people who lived beyond my gully and 'area'—*serious* people, whose lives looked bigger, more profound and more meaningful when compared to ours. I was mesmerized and overwhelmed.

It was a hitherto unknown layer of privilege, where your intellectual reputation opened doors that your technical skills may or may not have given you access to. As a *serious* person, you set the agenda, you determined what was prestigious, what was correct and what was cringe, and you could do all this while having bad academic grades or lowered wealth (for indeed, many Brahmans in my school were significantly less affluent than their Bania peers, yet were always somehow seen as better than the latter). They were always sort of 'above'. Like a default status.

I wanted that level of social access, approval and validation. I wanted it badly. So, like a hustling smuggler, I started looking for secret routes to hack into that zone of legitimacy.

One of my earliest discoveries was, of course, books. I figured they were an easy and accessible currency, but I did not have the language skills, time or patience to read all the books I had missed. So, I would buy the twenty-rupee, illustrated and abridged versions of classical literature. That was how I read everything from *David Copperfield* to *The Last of the Mohicans*—through pictures and simplified plots meant for little children. I learnt just enough to be able to convince *serious* people that I had actually read the whole thing.

I eventually learnt that music and cinema were also a big deal. So, I buried my love for Bollywood and began downloading English songs from artists I had heard the *serious* people discussing. MP3 files of Nirvana, Queen, The Beatles, Pink Floyd, etc., were downloaded via Napster and LimeWire, first at cybercafés and then on the computer my father purchased (first buying the cheapest spare parts from the wholesale market and then assembling them privately). I never

admitted that the music was pirated because, back then, that was considered uncool—you had to go to music stores and buy CDs. So, I would go to Planet M, Music World and other such stores and listen to CDs on the headphones hung for sampling.

Those now long-dead corporate brick-and-mortar music stores were among my first pilgrimages, larping as a 'serious person', picking up minor skills of blending in. During my later years in school, when I started infiltrating *serious* circles, I would often find some pretext to walk into one of these stores with them and audition for approval. It was a careful dance. You didn't actually need to be seen purchasing CDs or DVDs. Instead, you needed to appear like you 'belonged' there. Like you were a regular. I would walk in and deposit my bag without being directed, subtly indicating that I had been through this process a million times.

Complaining was a secret language of belonging; you complained about the security, you complained about the prices and you complained about the lack of a good collection. In fact, one of my best moves was to go to the store reception and ask for some obscure collection. 'Hi, can you check if you have the 1975 Lynyrd Skynyrd album, *Nuthin' Fancy*? Yes, it's spelt n-u-t-h-i-n, not "nothing" as we say in everyday language. What? You don't? Damn.'

Then you complained about how no one took music seriously—how could they not have Lynyrd Skynyrd's third studio album in stock? Of course, back then, I hadn't heard more than two or three of the band's songs and didn't really care for their music beyond being able to flex that my music taste was original. 'What? No, I don't want the *Best of Lynyrd Skynyrd* CD, that's just a collection of their top hits. It obviously doesn't include their lesser-known tracks,' I would shoot off to the befuddled receptionist before turning to whoever I was auditioning for and add something like, 'Everything is now a "best of" collection. Whatever happened to selling originals?'

It was glorious. It was triumphant. In fact, back in the day, I foolishly thought that was all it took to blend in and be considered a *serious* person.

Unfortunately, it was more complicated. And the more I tried elaborate larping, the more obvious my desperation became. No matter how many lesser-known Bob Dylan tracks I referenced, or how many times I repeated that *Moby Dick* was my favourite novel, I

always seemed to be marked as the outsider. They laughed at me behind my back; they laughed at me to my face. In the era before political correctness became mainstream, humour was crude and upfront. I remember bearing the brunt of it. Everything—from my personal hygiene, my body odour, the wispy stubble on my face, the hair on my chest, my heavily accented English—was open for the meanest, most brutal teardowns. It is a nice touch that many of the folks who scarred my self-esteem have since reinvented themselves as anti-bullying mental health advocates. I see them sometimes. I wish them well. What they were doing to me back in the day was not bullying, it was something else. Something primal and instinctive. It was putting me back in my place. This was *their* culture. This was *their* dharma. This was the law of *their* universe. The times may have changed. The vocabulary may have changed. But the law of the universe was the same. Keeping people in their place had just acquired a more subtle touch.

'Ravikant's book, it's about savarna culture,' my friend responded to Kulkarni.

'Savarna?' Kulkarni giggled, scrunching up her nose a little as if she had smelt a rotten egg. 'What does that even mean?'

3

Savarna. *Sa* (meaning 'with', 'having' or 'in possession of') + *varna*. In every Indian textbook, the introduction to the caste system begins with the first lesson on the varna system. It is usually represented by one graphic—a triangle with four divided tiers, like neat little layered cakes stacked one on top of another. The bands are of equal thickness, with the topmost little triangle representing the Brahmans, the priestly caste who are the keepers of knowledge. The next two tiers represent the warrior Kshatriyas and the trader Vaishyas. Finally are the Shudras, or the caste in servitude to the three 'above them'.

This, while widely common, is a bad data visualization graph. Here is a better one for the varna categorization shown alongside.

Fig 1. Traditional varna representation

Fig 2. A more accurate varna representation

In Figure 1, the representation creates a visual equivalence—all varnas seem equal in clout and, though hierarchically arranged, appear more like equally vital functions of a system. In fact, in most classrooms, the teacher—also a savarna—explains exactly that: how the varna system was initially just a distribution of labour and was not rigid, but with the passage of time, it became increasingly corrupted and conservative. This immediately absolves a tradition of inequality, dehumanization and othering, recasting it as one that was functionalist, pragmatic and well-intentioned.

Figure 2 more accurately lays bare the realities of the construct. Firstly, it makes space for the communities that were deemed '*avarna*', or without the possession of a varna. These included geographically remote and inaccessible tribal and/or nomadic groups. Also considered avarna were communities that were forced to hereditarily undertake cruel and filthy labours such as sanitation work, cleaning of faecal matter, disposal of dead bodies and animal carcasses, etc. These latter groups were considered so 'impure' owing to the nature of their work that they were marked as 'untouchable'—a people so unclean that even a mere touch of their bodies would render you dirty and besmirched.[2]

Secondly, Figure 2 distinguishes the '*dwij*' savarna as a separate entity unto itself. The 'dwij', or twice-born, are the privileged savarnas who had the ritual right to spiritually purify themselves through ceremony. The men among them were allowed to wear a sacred thread—also known as *janeu, poonol*, etc.—on their bodies, signifying their higher attainment. The Shudras were not allowed to wear the thread, marking their debased bodies as fit only for servicing the needs of the 'higher' varna.[3]

Broken into the fragments of tens of thousands of brute occupations, these people constituted the servitude castes upon whose unpaid or underpaid labours society was built. Mirroring the slave societies of Greece, Rome and Egypt—where social order and civilization were built on the backs of unpaid and 'owned' slaves—the varna system in south Asia made one important innovation on the same. It made slavery and servitude hereditary and linked them to spiritual salvation. Resistance would not only endanger your choices in this life but would also jeopardize your prospects in future births—as well as

the souls of your ancestors. With the cosmic stakes raised so high and so deeply skewed in favour of the Brahmans and the other dwijs, public morality and social fairness took on new, perverted meanings. It was—and still is—a society where justice defines itself as the maintenance of varna dharma, rather than the universality of individual or social dignity and rights.

Against such celestial irrationality, resistance had to be grounded in the epistemology of reasoning, lived experience and logic. Thus arose the dhamma of the Buddha. An order of civic morality, social balance and harmony, built on the mastery of the mind and self. The Buddha's way lit a lamp that burnt bright for a thousand years and travelled across Asia. Millions of Buddhists walked the land of India, carving on to her rocks and caves beautiful mosaics carrying forward his teachings and lessons. Thousands of stupas dotted the landscape, and edicts of rock and stone and iron hoisted by Buddhist kings challenged time, urging its winds to carry Buddhist lessons to all who would listen.

The revolution of the Buddha changed the subcontinent in such a fundamental way that counter-revolution was inevitable. These massive movements coiled around each other like fighting snakes. With every epoch of history, revolution and counter-revolution twisted around each other, shaking and thrashing their way through centuries, becoming woven into the social fabric of the subcontinent.

Eventually, the changing social and historical forces obscured and erased even the traces of the Buddha's revolution from the land. The stupas were buried and forgotten, the edicts were rebranded as Bhima's staff or some such, Buddhist shrines were co-opted and remade as temples, till the very name of the mighty king Asoka and the revered Buddha were forgotten.[4]

Yet, the dhamma and its rationality persevered among the peoples broken by caste. Sometimes through the words of Kabir, sometimes through the music of Nanak and Mardana, sometimes through the memory of the forgotten people who remembered the caves and shrines and the words and the rituals. It lived on in the resistance of Jyotiba Phule and Savitrimai Phule, in the reclamation of Iyothee Thass and the defiance of Ayyankali and in countless other heroic interventions whose histories are yet to be fully researched and written.

And so it was, till he arose, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, a colossus walking across the cross-currents of history. In a single lifetime, he shaped the public consciousness of organized defiance and resurrected the dhamma of the Buddha as an emancipatory path to break free from the shackles of caste and varna—in law and in life, all at once.

Decades after his passing, the man who was born among the Mahars is now embraced as the 'father' of millions upon millions of people across India. He is Babasaheb to all of us—separated by geography, language, cuisine and culture, we unite in celebrating his life. His statues now stand in virtually every corner of India, in villages and slums where electricity and water may not have found their way fully. His birthday is observed in cities and towns with a spontaneous explosion of community joy, pride and civic unity displayed by some of the most vulnerable peoples of the world. The day of his acceptance of the Buddha's dhamma and the day of his passing are calendar events that corporates and public offices may not mark, but entire communities observe with a devotion that cannot be purchased by money nor orchestrated by slick PR firms.

Yet, for decades, *serious* people did not consider Babasaheb very seriously. Any writings by the architect of the Indian Constitution were absent from the readings for my undergraduate coursework in political science. He was not even mentioned in passing as a thinker or a political actor. Growing up in Calcutta, entering circles of *serious* people, I encountered an absolute erasure of not just Babasaheb but of any anti-caste scholar, movement or consciousness.

In those days of my youth, the political genius of Saheb Kanshiram was still redefining the social fabric in real time. Yet, I only heard sniggers about behenji Mayawati's looks. On TV, there were jokes about Lalu Prasad Yadav's crudeness and the 'jungle raj' in Bihar. Around me in college, I heard that 'there were no Dalits in Bengal'. Caste was not anywhere to be seen in such *serious* circles. Yet, my savarna friends affectionately called me '*nichu jaat*' (lower caste) sometimes. They were not mean. In fact, they loved me immensely, and I learnt a lot from them. From Mozart to The Beatles, to Satyajit Ray to Vishwamitra muni's 'superpowers'. Never about Namashudra culture and the Matua religion or the incredible anti-caste generational work of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. There was no caste around. Not, at least, in the readings, the academic discussions,

the conversations on art, in the bibliographies of past and present 'icons' of literary, cultural and political greatness.

But it was everywhere in the realm of judgements, of aesthetics, of name-calling, of 'putting people back in their place'. And I experienced it so deeply that despite reading about internalized misogyny in feminist literature, despite reading about the racialized 'self-hate' of Blackness that Malcolm X raged against, I ended up hating everything about myself, my family, my home, my language, my food, my way of life and my extended kin and all their kind. My hatred of myself was directly proportional to my desire to fit in and be accepted as a *serious* person. To be accepted as a savarna and to take my place in the company of the Bannerjees and Boses and Gangulys and the like, who never seemed bothered by things like career hustle or financial precarity. Who smoked cheap cigarettes because they liked them not because they had to, who looked bored and cynical because everything that we—the *lessers*—aspired for, they were already over it. I wanted that company. I wanted to be that person.

But, the funny part is, had you asked me then what it was that I wanted, I would not have had a name for it. It was a feeling. A collection of all their experiences and perspectives. Savarna culture is a performance of cultureless-ness. They define the 'default'. There is no self-referential assertion to reclaim a culture, because they are the culture. Its ubiquity hides its existence. So, it was perfectly normal for Kulkarni to ask, as so many before her have asked, 'What is a savarna?'

Having spent the better part of my youth learning the answer, I hope I can repay my debt to the savarnas by introducing them to themselves.

* * *

2

The Glass Floor

1

Marilyn Loden is widely credited by feminist scholars for coining the term ‘glass ceiling’ to draw attention to the material power that patriarchal social settings exert in limiting women. For instance, in a corporate setting—in theory at least—a talented and hard-working woman should be able to rise through the ranks and reach the very top. Beyond a certain level, however, no matter her merit, ingenuity and commitment to succeeding, she finds herself mysteriously stagnating. She can see her male peers continue to rise and rise, but she stays at her level. It is as if she has hit an invisible ceiling—a ceiling made of glass, if you will. It lets her see above her but keeps her from rising herself.

This has been a powerful metaphor, very visual and lucid in explaining the power of patriarchy within the corporate set-up and other social settings. It has also been used by other marginalized groups and racial minorities to explain the gatekeeping power of cultural elites.

However, when it comes to caste and savarnas, it is useful to think of a ‘glass floor’ rather than a ceiling.

Think of south Asia—India especially—as full of people sitting in a cramped and dirty basement. Think of millions and millions of heaving masses, sweating, crying, pleading, clawing—sometimes angry, sometimes despondent, sometimes hopeful, but at all times in the basement. Looking up at what is a glass ceiling for them but is, in fact, a floor above which lives a very small group of people. This small group of people, let us call them savarnas, have access to all the switches in all the rooms of the house, including the basement. They switch on the lights and switch them off at will. They turn on the

water and turn it off at will. Among the savarnas, there are often major disagreements about who should be controlling the switches, how often the lights or water should be kept on and when to switch them off. There are fights even. It is serious stuff. Many cliques and factions scheme and plot ruthlessly to keep each other out of power over the switches. But below them—beneath the floor on which the savarnas walk—millions upon millions look up without any hope of rising beyond the basement. They are stuck in the basement. They have been there for a thousand years and more.

The savarnas above the glass floor are aware that there is a mass of humanity in the basement 'below' them, but they are not always clear about exactly how many there are or in what condition they live. After a point, numbers lose their potential for shock or horror. What does 200 million mean? What does 500 million mean? What does living on Rs 250 per day mean? What does raising children on Rs 150 per day mean? Does living on Rs 100 per day make you poor? What about Rs 47 per day?

There have been many attempts at estimating what the 'poverty' line should be in the context of India. This has major policy implications. If a person is said to be below the poverty line, it means they are at a level of precarity where it is not practically possible for them to survive on their own. The C. Rangarajan Committee, in its 2014 report, suggested that Rs 47 per day in urban India should be one such viable 'line'.[5] Anyone making less than that in a city must be considered 'poor'—which means if you make Rs 48 per day, you cannot be considered poor. By this measure, 26.4 per cent of urban Indians can be classified as poor—meaning roughly one in four people in urban India earn less than Rs 48 per day.[6] That sounds low, but 48 is still just a number. It does not become real or horrifying at first glance to most urban, wealthy savarnas. It is so low that it loses its capacity to be imagined in real terms.

Therefore, as a professor who often teaches within savarna institutions, I conduct an exercise in my classes to bring into focus a more real frame of reference. I ask my students to think back to the most wretched and desperately poor person they have ever seen in their lives—which have been spent mostly in urban areas. Someone so vulnerable that their grim persona shook them to their moral core. One by one, examples come. It is usually a beggar, someone foraging

at the railway dump yard, ragpickers at the landfill or something similar. Then we try to calculate how much money each of these persons could be making per day. It almost always winds up to be above Rs 50 per day. What this means is that their worst imagination of what 'poor' is may not even be classified as 'poor' by the statistical modelling of the state. Such is the ghastly deprivation and scarcity in this society that one in four Indians live in a state of poverty that is beyond the imagination of savarna systems.

The scale of wretchedness and the mass of people living in this state have an enormity and urgency that wealthy savarnas seem truly incapable of grasping. Maybe ignorance is an adaptive feature. If you were forced to confront the existential terror of social inequality daily, then smiling for every selfie or buying expensive clothing or eating luxury food would become a torturous activity of macabre horror for the savarnas.

2

The era from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s was a period of wild prospecting by many savarna entrepreneurs. They were giddy at the likelihood of mining great wealth from the vast masses living below the glass floor. Fortune, it seemed, was just waiting to be won by that one great business idea or delivery/execution mechanism that would crack open the Indian 'masses'. No doubt spurred by similar sentiments, in 2011, two savarna techies working on the project that eventually became 'Aadhar' decided to quit their jobs and launch a start-up selling healthcare services. The lure was, of course, the 600 million Indians they had estimated to possess mobile phone connections—each of whom were potential customers. To put this number in context, it is roughly twice the entire population of western Europe.

This was the epoch of delusion, where every corporate estimate assumed that the millions in the 'basement' could now be engaged solely through the wonders of mobile telephony and digital connectivity. It was taken for granted that they were just waiting there, latent and unengaged only due to the lack of entrepreneurial innovation and technological handicaps, and not because of the crushing poverty and caste stratifications that rendered any attempts

to build consumerist markets around them untenable. All savarna business pundits and business school elites speculated that just one great idea, algorithm or app was needed to reach out and connect to these standby millions. Thus emerged a scramble among savarna elites to try and bridge this gap, to make their billions while also taking credit for revolutionarily 'transforming India'.

The aforementioned savarna techie boys, similarly inspired, decided to pursue their entrepreneurial dream but, crucially, first decided to gain business intelligence about their estimated 600-million-strong Indian market. While this may appear to be the most natural first step —and indeed, business school professors and industry veterans exoticize the 'real world' and the learning experience of doing business 'on the streets' ad nauseam—it appears that street knowledge continues to be very thin among management professionals and within institutional pedagogy. While we cover some of these themes in greater depth later in the book (see Chapter 3), suffice it to say for now that the ethnography of both the extremely poor and the extremely rich in this country is little understood—at least in real, material terms.

So when Tushar Vashisht and his friend decided to live on what they speculated was the income earned by an 'average Indian' for a month, they could not have known what they would discover. They decided to limit themselves to Rs 100 per day, or about Rs 3000 for the month (not counting the rent). How they arrived at this figure is unclear, but their commitment to live on roughly Rs 3000 for the whole month was commendable—based on the story he himself has told multiple times over.

The two boys—one a former investment banker in San Francisco and the other a computer science graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—moved into a small, 10-foot x 6-foot 'room' in the Bellandur suburb of Bangalore. They reported paying a rent of Rs 1500 each for that tiny hovel, and this money was not counted in their living off Rs 100 per day equation. They both reported losing weight from malnourishment. But, interestingly, they started developing insights into the interconnected math of calories, labour, money and time that almost every impoverished person knows instinctively. For instance, the further one has to walk means not just more time spent but also burning more calories. So, workspaces had to

be close by. Protein immediately disappeared from their diet since it cost more money to consume. They had to load up on cheap carbohydrates to meet their energy needs.

It is not revealed what kind of labour the boys performed during this experiment, but it is unlikely that they engaged in the kind of hard manual labour jobs that people at such levels of financial precarity usually have to do.[7] The physical exertion and lack of sanitation at such job sites place great stress on the body. In research I conducted among women sanitation workers in Pune, almost all respondents reported chronic pains and aches, for which they routinely self-medicated.[8] Additionally, multiple studies have connected the lack of access to safe and dignified washrooms for women to them limiting their water intake during work hours, placing great stress on their kidneys and leaving them vulnerable to urinary tract infections.[9] And once they fall ill, taking a day off from work is not an option in such income-insecure households.

Health risk estimation takes on a completely different form from the way elite savarnas are used to imagining repression, and 'bearing it' become the default means of coping with early stages of most ailments. This further transfers intergenerationally through codes of personal behaviour and expectations. My mother, a woman of stout resolve, inherited and passed on such codes, wherein even today, it is a matter of deep personal ego in our family to take 'rest' for illnesses like fever. It was only much later in life, when I was around savarna circles, that I realized it was not juvenile or pampered to nurse yourself back to health after a minor illness or injury. Endurance gets romanticized and normalized to the point that 'toughness' becomes something that vulnerable individuals must constantly perform, both as a culture and out of a lack of options.

It is almost certain that the savarna boys did not delve into these obvious terrains of intersectional vulnerabilities and could 'opt out' at any time, or take days off. They had, of course, kept the clothes, laptops and even a badminton set from their pre-experiment lives. They had simply reduced their social experience to limited monetary budgets while retaining cultural capital and amenities from their regular lives.

What social learning such a flawed method provided besides self-congratulatory anecdotes is debatable, but they did uncover another

interesting facet of life on the margins. When you are so income-distressed, your world shrinks. They reported that 'life' had to be conducted within a 5 kilometre radius as far as possible because anything beyond was not regular walking distance and hence subject to additional spending for public transport. Not to mention, the exertion would place additional energy demands on the already energy-deficient body, with no means of supplementing it.

Following the conclusion of their experiment, Tushar gave multiple narrative accounts of the 'lessons learnt' via media platforms and TED talks (avenues that are almost exclusively run by fellow savarnas). This was a 'popular story' within savarna circles. Their own kind had ventured below the glass floor and brought back stories from the other side. Akin to travellers' tales from the past, their stories cast them as adventurers, mavericks, whose legend spread wide. Young men would seek them out based on these stories and say, 'I want to work for you,' and the story of this 'experiment' became the seeding story of their future business. No doubt it was narrated multiple times for potential investors and clients. The savarna capacity for self-aggrandizing myth-making is built on the capacity to *perform*humility while appearing to endure sacrifice for the public good. These experiments, which may have begun as a means of gathering business intelligence for their mobile-based healthcare business, instead created a compelling 'savarna' story. The only unique aspect of this story was that it was experienced in a very diluted way by two of their own—whereas for hundreds of millions of people below the glass floor, it is a daily reality.

They did eventually launch their healthcare solutions app in 2011, known today as 'HealthifyMe'. A very useful app for counting calories and wellness coaching, among other things. It is a very successful business, with an operating revenue of over Rs 220 crore in 2023. It claims to have a user base of 35 million.[10] While impressive, this is far from the 600 million 'masses' that were just waiting to be monetized (as per the market wisdom from about two decades ago).

3

Poverty, even as cosmically horrifying as it is in extent and intensity, is only one of the dimensions of life below the glass floor. Caste and

class intertwine in south Asia in deep, immutable ways. While it may be disingenuous to say that all savarnas are rich—in this society, with our levels of scarcity, nobody except the top 0.5 per cent can truly be called 'rich'—what exists instead are levels of graded deprivation. And capital comes in multiple forms, not just money.

Firstly, the overlap between class and caste is significant. A much higher percentage of Brahman or Bania families, for instance, are economically better off than those among scheduled caste or scheduled tribe (SC/ST) communities. The Oxfam 'India Discrimination Report' (2022) suggests that household heads of SC/ST families still earn less on average than others with comparable education and age. The report suggested that this deviation was due largely to discrimination.

Similarly, unemployment among urban Muslims was found to be much higher, again attributed to social exclusion and discrimination. Another study by Chavi Tiwari, Srinivas Goli, Md. Siddiqui and Pradeep Salve, which looked closely at material conditions of poverty within the state of Uttar Pradesh, revealed similar findings.[11] Mean per capita expenditure was highest among Brahmans, Thakurs and other Hindu savarnas, followed by Yadavs, Kurmis, Jats, etc., who are all historically Shudra castes that acquired some land and prosperity over the last century or so. At the lower end of the curve, the study found the lowest expenditure among Dalits, both Hindu and Muslim.

A point to note here is that while the data suggests low expenditure among Dalits and high expenditure among Brahmans and Thakurs, even the so-called 'high' numbers are very low compared to the average, metropolis-dwelling, intergenerationally English-literate savarna.

Secondly, even among the poorer savarna families, agency exists in other forms. Social clout and access to mobility, for instance, are comparatively much higher. In rural as well as small-town settlements across south Asia, feudal mastery is still deeply coded along caste lines. Family 'reputations' and lore go back generations, and even the more economically stressed savarna families will bask in the 'prestige and reputation' of the more successful branches of the family.

As individual savarnas rise in affluence and reputation, they often return to their native spaces, contributing to temples or some such local institutions that further their cultural reach. They often also

serve as referral conduits, helping place more of their caste kin in better positions. It is through such networks of caste and kinship references that many jobs open up for upcoming talents. Even when a job placement is not directly influenced by such a reference, simply being informed of an opening in advance or having a quiet word in the right ears can often make a great difference. It is very difficult to track or historically contextualize, but it would not be in the realm of fantasy to speculate that the grandfathers or great-grandfathers of many successful, high-flying savarna operators today got their start in this fashion.

Nidhin Shobhana has studied the network of Brahman organizations across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that created a support system of fellowships, grants and physical infrastructure—such as messes and hostels—to provide direct material support to specific Brahman communities as they made their way from the rural and feudal to the urban modern world.[12]

Anoop Kheri, a lifelong Ambedkarite activist who grew up in Uttar Pradesh, recalls a common saying in his neck of the woods that goes something like this: 'Even the poorest Brahman can reach the Prime Minister's Office in four phone calls'. What this means is that even the poorest Brahman, if he were to reach out to the most successful kin he knows, and that person, in turn, reached out to the most successful kin he knows, then it would take just four such steps to reach even the Prime Minister's Office in India. While the saying is apocryphal and obviously exaggerated for dramatic effect, it does underline the cumulative reach of savarna communities.

The experience of 'success' for SCs and STs at the other end of the spectrum is, however, very different. India has seen two Dalits and one Adivasi elevated to the ceremonial position of head of State—the President of India, the highest political position in the country. Even so, there have been media reports of President Ram Nath Kovind and President Droupadi Murmu being denied entry to some temples even as they visited in their official capacity as head of State, making it clear that even the President of India can be denied access to caste-sanctified spaces.

In 2024, the newly elected chief minister of Telangana, Revanth Reddy of the Congress party, while visiting the Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple with a few cabinet ministers, made his deputy chief

minister, Mallu Vikramarka Bhatti, sit at a lower level than himself and the other savarna ministers. Bhatti comes from a Dalit background, and speculation was rife that this was due to his 'lower' caste status compared to Reddy, who belongs to a Shudra-agrarian caste. The controversy made the party look bad and hence allegations were subsequently dismissed, including by Bhatti himself. But in the era of 24x7 visual documentation of public figures, such incidents do not escape scrutiny. Social media and news reports on spatial segregation and distancing of lower-caste persons at religious sites and shrines are constantly surfacing.

Not all the prejudice and ostracism comes exclusively from Brahmans and savarnas. The nature of graded caste inequality means that even the marginalized and backward caste groups assert supremacy, and often violence, upon Dalits, tribals and communities 'lower' than them. Very often, the assertion from agrarian Shudra castes that have emerged as locally and feudally dominant—such as Jat, Kunbi, Yadav, Patidar, Maratha, Reddy, Kappa, Kamma, Vokaligga, Thevar, Vanniyar, etc.—manifests as feudal brutality inflicted upon 'lower' castes.

While there are many socio-economic factors behind the patterns of caste-based atrocities, it is revealing to note that assertion from such communities rarely pushes against the cultural authority of the Brahmans, which prevails uncontested. Even in regions such as Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, which witnessed strong anti-Brahmanism movements in the twentieth century—leading to the decline of direct Brahman political leadership in the region—Brahman hegemony remains unchallenged in domains of culture, the arts, education and even sport.

Neither are such instances of cultural supremacy limited to persons within the Hindu religious fold. Pasmanda Muslims, Ravidassia and Ramdassia Sikhs and tribal Christians, among others, have long waged movements against caste-based discrimination within non-Hindu religious spaces.

The graded inequality of caste resists a simplistic understanding of the equations involved. In addition to multidimensional poverty, oppressed caste communities face multidimensional discrimination, exclusion, prejudice and violence—along with multidimensional inaccessibility to legal agency and economic mobility. This makes life

under the glass floor static, suffocating and soul-crushing to the point where the only asset remaining to those growing up in such hells is the hell itself. The *basti*, the *gully-moholla*, the family and the community remain the only flimsy safeguards and safety nets tying people down to their islands of isolation, marooned within the networked world of savarna mobility.

Success in such a context means removing oneself from one's community and relocating within the savarna cultural system. It means re-learning social cues from Brahmans and others alike, repositioning one's identity and internalizing forms of social hate to be more acceptable to the savarna gaze. Culturally, Brahmanism retains within itself the power to name, validate, critique and categorize the 'other'. Thus, it follows that savarnas decide which 'success' is legitimate and which is unwarranted.

Compliance with savarna systems and remaining under the radar is a heavily prioritized trait among many successful persons from SCs, STs and other backward classes (OBCs), especially in fields dominated by Brahmans, Kayasths and analogous savarnas. Assertion, no matter how miniscule or structurally non-threatening, invites hostility and delegitimizing that extends far into the networks of savarna systems, into rooms and ears that the 'successful' marginalized caste person will never have access to. Long before the latter even walks into a meeting, rumours of them being difficult, unethical or worse will have already preceded them.

Being 'successful' as a marginalized caste person in savarna society is like walking on eggshells—carefully avoiding the wrath of savarna masters while constantly losing bits of yourself through erosion and distance from your community, identity and sense of self. Over time, you start mirroring and mimicking the savarna gaze so completely that your own community's lack of success appears to you as a product of their inhibition and small-minded pettiness. This has deep implications on a person's sense of self, identity and its manifestations in personal life, love and loss (discussed further in Chapter 5).

Brahman and savarna success is built through kinship networks and amplifies community links, whereas 'success' especially in savarna domains for people from marginalized communities comes in the opposite form. It frequently breaks organic links, teaches mistrust and doubt towards one's own community and almost always results in

isolation.

4

Success for savarnas may be generationally incremental and have an amplifying effect on others within their communities, but it certainly does not mean that they do not have complaints. All social problems are contextual, and every experience is understood in personal and comparative ways, not in absolute terms. Every savarna elite has a 'struggle story' of having overcome health issues, mental challenges, money problems or family dysfunctionality. This is not to underplay or dismiss all savarna 'struggle stories' as insincere. Rather, the point is to highlight how such stories are integral to the myth-making of savarna success, which is sharply contrasted with the failure of the marginalized, whose struggles are attributed to their being 'spoilt' or 'lacking discipline'. Taken together, these processes achieve a remarkable function—they at once make the savarna look heroic and frame their achievements through a narrative of personal triumph in the face of adversity, while robbing the marginalized individual of the same framing rights. The latter's (often far greater) struggle is instead contextualized as a collective failure of their kind and a lack of heroic individual capacity to triumph over the same. This allows the savarnas to simultaneously laud themselves for victories won on the back of intergenerational privileges, cultural networks and a myriad of social advantages, while haranguing the marginalized.

The segregation in a caste society is so deeply spatial and social in nature that it fractures even the savarna imagination. Most savarnas lose their capacity to see themselves as 'part of the whole' with the people below the glass floor. They can mouth the words of equality as enshrined in the Constitution of India, but in real terms, they lack the capacity to see the masses below the glass floor as people similar to themselves—capable of feeling similar irritations, anxieties, dreams, aspirations and issues. The people below the floor are only a mob, a *bheed*, a crowd—a lump without nuance or cultural granularity. Such spectacular capacity for mass dehumanization has an interesting effect on the savarna perspective. It seems to shrink their world view to just their own selves and their immediate communities. This self-absorbed gaze breeds an innate, consuming and collective narcissism.

This is routinely evident in the everyday thinking of urban elites in India. For instance, a clip may go viral on social media showing train travellers without reserved seats crowding into AC three-tier coaches. The common savarna reaction to this would be to bemoan the collapse of discipline and the lack of respect for AC ticket-paying customers. They would also demand strict disciplinary action, possibly involving the police, before lamenting that this is why India can never develop.

In such a situational analysis, the elite savarna mind will completely overlook the desperation of the ticketless travellers—the lack of travel options, the absence of amenities and the severe mismatch between demand and supply of coaches needed for comfortable and dignified travel for all. To the educated, elite savarna mind, this situation can only be understood from their own perspective, which is likely situated within the AC coaches in this example. The non-reserved ticket passengers are not fellow citizens, nor are they human beings. They are interlopers, invaders, the mob that has violated their personal spaces. Every issue tends to be seen only through such a lens —one of exclusion, anger or deep, degrading pity.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had commented on this pernicious effect of caste on civic morality, especially in *Annihilation of Caste*. He notes that if there is a 'consciousness of kind' among caste-Hindus, it is rooted in caste, not civic community. The ideas of nationalism, which are based on 'horizontal comradeship'—and as enshrined within the Constitution of India, promise equality in the eyes of the law for all Indians—simply do not exist in practice. The comradeship and sense of belonging to an equal collective is limited to one's own caste or, at best, some adjacent communities.

In the context of elite savarnas, this means their idea of citizenship is limited to their own kind. They may imagine themselves as living in a nation of their own, made from among their own, but one that spatially occupies a similar geography as the rest of the masses. I say 'similar', not the same. Because the savarna nation may be experienced in its most elite form only in certain neighbourhoods—Town side, Bandra West and Hiranandani Powai in Mumbai; south Delhi; Park Street and Southern Avenue in Calcutta; Koramangala in Bengaluru; Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad; Baner and Aundh in Pune, etc. Like illegal immigrants, the people below the glass floor leak into these enclaves of the elite and provide cheap, devalued and often

dehumanizing labour. For them, the elite-savarna nation is a ruthless nation where they have few rights and fewer dignities. They may possess an Aadhaar card just like their savarna masters, but they may as well be living in different nations, different continents.

The elite savarnas rarely venture into the parts of the city that fall below the glass floor. In parts of Mumbai, they now offer 'slum tours'—a perfect semiotic synthesis of the sign and signifier. It is a journey into the netherworld—a territory to visit, witness the spectacle of, and return from as soon as one can.

In 2020, Amazon Prime India dropped the first season of the limited TV series titled *Paatal Lok*. The opening trailer itself referenced this instinctive spatial understanding, suggesting that, as in Brahmanical mythology, there exist three different worlds in real life: the heavens where the gods reside, the earth where the mortals live, and the netherworld, the *paatal*, where insects dwell. The people below the floor. They are actually not even people, but insects, living lives of brute violence, deprivation and deep immorality—a spectacle for the gods and mortals but also a source of dread and fear.

Around the same time as the series, a Facebook page titled 'Reptiles of Kurla' went viral. Kurla is a poorer neighbourhood of Mumbai, largely populated by the working poor from marginalized castes and Muslim backgrounds. In other words, it is below the glass floor; it is the underworld. The 'Reptiles' in the title did not refer to the local ecosystem of lizards and snakes, but to the poor who live there. From whom even their humanity is robbed for comic effect, reducing them to something animal-like, something reptilian. Their efforts to style and groom themselves with next to no money are neither appreciated nor applauded for their inventiveness and resourcefulness. Instead, they are shamed and laughed at for their apparent absurdity when compared to the fashion that the elites can afford. The 'chapri', an oft-used slur for such poor and marginalized people who are not 'polished' enough culturally, is not a person. The chapri is not human. The chapri is just a punchline to a joke.

Not every intervention of the elite savarnas below the glass floor stems from disdain, scorn, mockery or hate. Often, it is also a product of their dehumanizing pity and necessity for performing humility. Many English-speaking savarnas who had lived overseas returned soaked in American popular cultural imagination. By the early 2010s,

in posher neighbourhoods of Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore, fans of rap, spoken poetry, beatboxing and stand-up comedy had begun creating tiny rooms where they could cosplay these hobbies. These 'scenes' were uniformly mediocre, hosting a medley of hyper-privileged individuals determined to fit into the role of the 'struggling artist' they had fantasized themselves to be. Neither did any great artistic oeuvre emerge from these spaces, nor was there any major reinvention of the form. Instead, these spaces existed—continue to exist—as a venue for untalented, uncritical consumption of personal vanity, tolerated by mutual agreement and passed off as artistic niche.

However, by virtue of existing, these spaces inevitably overlapped with the world below the glass floor. Sometimes, spoken-word poets, self-identifying as 'empaths', went into the shanty towns of Mumbai to procure some enterprising young person as a 'poet from the slums'. Sometimes, the domestic worker of a comic would get to do a stand-up show or star in their 'reels' on social media. Sometimes, a rapper would emerge from the ghetto and spit rhymes about the world they saw around them.

In the face of these overlaps and the need to be original, savarnas were forced to respond and comment on the larger city and its people, not just the spaces of their own kind. It is in these responses, in their pitying gaze, that the marginalized were either subjects of deep despair, objects to be rescued and displayed as projects, or targets of stupefying humour and confounding lifestyles.

In the early to mid-2010s, when comedy collectives like All India Bakchod (AIB) and The Viral Fever (TVF) rose via YouTube into the somewhat mainstream youth cultural consciousness, their humour mirrored precisely such themes. Caste as a point of commentary or analysis was absent. Poverty was unidimensional, often a secondary aspect in sketches based on so-called middle-class savarna lives. I say 'so-called middle-class' because by every yardstick—including that of the Healthify founder-adventurers—these characters would be called somewhat rich.

Many individuals—writers and comedians especially—have since been retroactively 'dragged' on social media for tweets and casual comments made in that era. Comments that mocked politicians from marginalized communities, that made fun of the supposed lack of beauty in Mayawati or the lack of refinement in Lalu Prasad Yadav.

The lack of capacity of many of these savarna artists and cultural commentators to see the political beyond their own narrow world view was betrayed at this moment. In their gaze, the only real issue was 'corruption', which was always operationalized in the comically reductive manner of a politician or a government official taking a bribe.

The Anna Hazare movement rose against such corruption. A big narrative was built via the media and civil society systems, claiming that the government of the day had corrupt leaders who were taking big bribes for quid pro quo benefits. However, no one asked: if such huge bribes were indeed being accepted, who had the money to pay such vast sums? What was the source of the money? The elite English-speaking class—proud of paying income tax, living in gated communities with neat little gardens and fountains—failed to see that their own wealth and affluence were a direct result of such 'corruption'. (More on the elite savarna gaze on this movement and its impact in Chapter 7.)

Wealth creation in India, contrary to what elite savarnas believe, is not the product of a politically neutral hackathon-style challenge of problem solving where success is determined solely by talent, merit and hard work. It has always been a process of hijacking regulatory processes, manipulating policy openings to favour your business and creating favourable market scenarios. Many of these opportunities are created by quid pro quo dealings between businesses and political masters, often mediated by caste and kinship networks.

The salaries and lifestyles of most wealthy savarnas are directly connected to this economy of 'corruption' that they rail and rant against. Not to mention, their very housing—often built on land seized or (il)legally torn away from the marginalized castes living on it—is developed by real estate developers whose business and finance are inextricably linked to the murky worlds of political financing and municipal as well as state cooperation. Yet none of this stops the savarna elites from speaking with an entitled tone, as if their lifestyle, existence and wealth were accumulated independently from the kind of systems they claim to abhor. This ability to divorce the self from the material conditions that are intimately related to it is peculiar in its near totality amongst savarna systems above the glass floor.

Thus, we contend with the principles of self-reflection and self-

assessment in the savarna gaze, both upon itself and upon those living under the glass floor beneath their feet. The latter remain an incomprehensible whole, too innumerable to count and too obscure to decipher—consigned to remain in a semi-human estimation. These masses may only be seen or thought of collectively, not as individuals. They may be pitied, but any effort to systematically provide them equality, dignity and opportunities will not be tolerated. For the savarnas are always 'struggling'.

In their self-lore, savarnas are incapable of accepting that their success is a function of historical networks—both cultural and material—which assisted their rise while simultaneously limiting and breaking communities below the glass floor. In their self-lore, every savarna has struggled and is 'self-made'. Struggle is only understood in very personal terms—not in comparative terms. To succeed in an entrance exam or in setting up a business, for instance, one must work hard and devote many hours. However, to see that labour alone as proof of 'struggle' is a disingenuous understanding of privilege. To ignore all the structural advantages they have over millions of other hard-working and intelligent people—who never got to fulfil their potential because a social order kept them locked below the glass floor—creates a strange culture of mythologizing one's success and divorces one from a sense of accountability and giving back to the collective. It diminishes temperance and maturity that would come from acknowledging a role in gatekeeping avenues of success for a vast majority of one's fellow citizens.

It is thus possible for savarna billionaires—especially from Bania and Sindhi backgrounds—to laud their own castes as uniquely entrepreneurial owing to advantages of intergenerational, caste-exclusionary, closed kinship commercial ties, while critiquing the same marginalized castes upon whose labour they have built their fortunes for using historical caste exclusion as a basis for demanding social justice. Similarly, savarna intellectuals—especially from Brahman and Kayastha communities—will marvel at their history of producing 'successful and self-made' icons, while decrying marginalized caste efforts to seek representation in academic and knowledge-production spaces that they were caste-mandated to be excluded from, as a victim mindset or as dependency on 'freebies'.

The spectacular capacity of the savarna gaze to understand social

privilege, exclusion, advantage and disadvantage from only a narcissistic, self-referential perspective suggests that perhaps the glass below their feet is deeply photochromic. The more brightly the fires burn in the paatal below, the darker the glass becomes, shielding their eyes from the sight. But the glass, thus far tightly sealed, is beginning to crack. Smoke, smells and screams are all beginning to leak into their floor.

This is beginning to make the savarnas very uncomfortable.

* * *

3

Karlo Duniya Mutthi Mein: Corporate Savarna–Capital Complex

1

In the early 2000s, Reliance India forayed into the mobile telephony business. One of its advertising campaigns, based on cricket, featured the then-young, explosive batsman, Virender Sehwag. The ad depicted Sehwag needing to score six runs off the last ball of the match. Amidst the tension, a spectator receives a message on his Reliance phone that is meant for Sehwag. He hesitates and decides not to interrupt the game, but thankfully, a little boy decides otherwise. He steals the phone, evades security and dramatically runs onto the field. He throws the Reliance phone to Sehwag. It is a message from his mother, who, over the pristine Reliance network, urges her son: '*Karlo duniya mutthi mein*' (Grab the world in the palm of your hand). Inspired by her words, Sehwag hits a six, and India wins the match. The ad, tagline, message and execution were all intended to be serious, sincere and wholesome, and yet they ended up being unintentionally funny. Audiences found the maudlin tone over the top. What was intended to be a rousing anthem ended up being a comical maxim.

This inverted disconnect between ambition and execution is perhaps the best metaphor for the farcical, self-congratulatory tone with which the millennial generation of elite savarna professionals frame themselves. This is a cohort that truly believes they have transformed India, pulling it out of the stagnation of pre-1990s India.

In the early 2000s, the savarna middle class wholeheartedly embraced market capitalism. Such was their rejection of the pre-liberalization social order—which they themselves had established—that the then-naïve Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regime built its

entire election campaign around the 'India Shining' slogan. Their electoral loss notwithstanding, that savarna generation convinced itself that India was beginning to shine. Not only was it shining brightly, but they believed that their innovative labours were leading India towards a golden dawn. This was the generation that was supposed to make India a 'superpower' by 2020.

No one led the charge in a more Quixotic manner than the army of millennial savarna MBAs, churned out in batches from 2002 to roughly 2014. In many ways, this is where the generation that powers the current technocratic development fantasies was forged. The current BJP regime in its early years was animated by buzzwords like Make in India, start-ups, entrepreneurship and innovation, was itself erected upon the preceding decade of non-BJP rule, where the savarna middle class was given a free hand in shaping socio-economic narratives. They were instrumental in selectively transforming certain posh neighbourhoods in metropolitan areas while wrecking larger urban systems within the cities. Many of today's environmental inequities, especially in Bengaluru, Gurgaon and Mumbai, have been fuelled by aggressive, rampant urbanization of premium real estate, driven by this cohort. Yet, they bear no critical burden for the cost imposed on the larger citizenry. Even now, the dominant discourse celebrates the merit, talent and hard work of this overwhelmingly savarna cohort instead of holding them accountable for the bottlenecks in India's growth story.

These are capitalists who are bad at capitalism itself, adept only at picking the lowest-hanging fruits—often made available through generous subsidies, tax incentives or outright capture/subversion of regulatory mechanisms, and secured through close relations with political parties and organs of the State. Yet, in typical savarna fashion, their self-aggrandizing mythologies are constructed and repeated ad nauseam, wherein this small cohort sees itself as stewards not just of industrial growth and innovation but also of nation-building. From the middle-management MBA to the highest C-suite executives, savarna systems have validated them uncritically as revolutionary minds and as individuals whose inputs must be sought even in matters of public democracy.

This is something they are singularly unsuited for as their world view and 'genius' have never been critically examined, even within

the context of management paradigms. For decades, business news reportage, business school faculty and the like have remained sycophantically subservient to this order, and any deviation from the broad consensus has been unheard of. It is only in recent times that this facade is beginning to crumble. The celebrated, 'inspiring' and 'pioneering' savarna business icons of just a decade ago are increasingly revealing themselves as out of touch, casteist and anti-poor elites whose opinions on larger social and national issues carry these biases with them.

Narayana Murthy, the billionaire founder of Infosys, recently suggested that young people should be ready to work seventy hours a week, or about ten hours daily with no days off.[13] He said this in the context of nation-building, arguing that it requires a high labour buy-in from the youth. It is unclear which labour and what kind of youth he was referring to, but his sentiments resonate with many wealthy elite savarnas.

Shantanu Deshpande, founder of the Bombay Shaving Company, was previously called out for urging young professionals to work eighteen-hour days early in their careers.[14] On his business podcast show, he discussed this matter with Radhika Gupta, managing director and CEO of Edelweiss Mutual Fund, who is also a judge on the popular business reality TV show, *Shark Tank India*. She agreed that young people do not want to work hard for their success and instead just want to go on holidays and buy expensive phones. They cackled about how the youth wants to experience life abroad instead of focusing on savings or career-building.

While this may seem like sound advice, corporate India is bursting at its seams with overworked employees. The six-day work week is no longer the exception but the norm, and the eight-hour work day is a myth. Salaries have not kept pace with the rising cost of living and if —in the midst of a stress-induced burnout—the fantasy of travelling abroad is what keeps young employees going, why should that be mocked?

In India, overseas travel has long been closely guarded. Till 1967, the Indian government was unwilling to issue passports to anyone except the 'best kinds' of citizens. Till 2000, even the process of acquiring a passport was largely inaccessible to most Indians. Even now, less than 10 per cent of Indians own a passport. Since the 1980s,

Bollywood has portrayed foreign locations in dreamy, romantic ways, making them central to many iconic films. Given this context, the desire to go abroad—even briefly—is sociologically understandable. To mock this is especially disingenuous considering the backgrounds of both speakers.

Shantanu was born in the US, where his father held a high-level tech job from 1981 to 1997. His family returned to India when his father was offered the position of CEO at Tech Mahindra.

Similarly, Radhika had extended exposure to international systems early on, as her father was an Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer. She grew up travelling with him across multiple countries and earned her degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. Her savarna 'struggle story' talks about her battle with depression and an accident at birth. Overcoming these would no doubt have been challenging, but it would be disingenuous to overlook the advantages of being born into a savarna IFS family and receiving an Ivy League education—both of which greatly helped her in starting a venture firm with her husband —who is also a Wharton alumnus. For individuals such as Shantanu and Radhika to claim that young people lack a work ethic because they dream of foreign holidays, while overlooking their own privilege, is a classic case of the distorted savarna 'photochromic gaze' (mentioned in Chapter 2)—where any struggle apart from their own appears frivolous.

Incidentally, just weeks after the duo lamented the lack of a work ethic among the youth, Narayana Murthy—the original proponent of the seventy-hour work week—'gifted' shares worth Rs 240 crore to his grandson, Ekagrah Murthy. Ekagrah's father, Rohan Murty, is already worth hundreds of millions of dollars, having inherited Infosys shares. In 2013, when Narayana Murthy returned to Infosys as executive chairman and director, Rohan was hired as his executive assistant. Later, he founded Soroco, an artificial intelligence company, and was recognized in Fortune's '40 Under 40' list.

His sister, Akshata Murty, has had a successful and lucrative career as a venture capitalist and the director of Catamaran Ventures (a firm originally backed by her father, now dissolved), which she co-founded with her husband, Rishi Sunak, the former prime minister of the UK.[15] She is also the former director of Soroco and holds a stake worth hundreds of millions of dollars in her father's company, Infosys.

Akshata also earned her MBA from Stanford University, USA, where she met her now-husband.

It is easy to single out the Murthy family, or the Deshpande family, or the Guptas, or Agarwals or countless others, but the point one is trying to underline is not about an individual or group making such statements—it is about the entire savarna ecosystem.

Speak to any middle-manager IT 'bro', start-up veteran, financial investor/banker, business school professor or researcher or even a young, aspiring MBA—and more than likely, similar comments will emerge. This is not the result of one person being clueless; it is a savarna construction of meta-discourses, wherein marginalized folks aspiring for similar lives and joys as themselves triggers a primal dismissal. So deeply embedded is this construct that it appears like logic to them—the 'other' is so dehumanized that their desire for the same privileges the savarna elite were born into appears illegitimate. So they mock, they dismiss, they diminish, and in more extreme cases, they disbar, threaten and punish. Such a decentralized yet universally embedded impulse of exclusion needs to be understood both in terms of where it originates and how it has taken shape.

2

According to the varna system, simplistically speaking, trade and commerce were reserved for the Vaishya community, or Banias, as they are commonly known. Even today, India's leading business tycoons come from this community. A study of the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) revealed that the largest number of CEOs/MDs in listed companies come from Bania backgrounds.[16] They have also typically dominated the richest in India lists. Most of today's prominent business tycoons—including Ambani, Adani, Mittal, Ruia, Jindal, Agarwal, Goenka and Birla, among others—are all Bania or from mercantile adjacent communities such as Parsis, Bohra Muslims, Khatris, etc. Collectively, they have a near monopoly on the material economy of this vast subcontinent.

This is not a recent development. For the last five centuries, Bania communities have dominated the economy and have had a tremendous impact on political fortunes. It was the Bania Jagat Seth family of Murshidabad—possibly the richest bankers and traders in

extended India at the time—who invited the British to intervene against the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah. The historian William Dalrymple notes that without the financial backing of Jagat Seth Mehtab Chand, the deal between the British Governor of Bengal, Robert Clive and the main general of the Bengal Army Mir Jafar would not have been possible.[17] This deal sealed the outcome of the Battle of Plassey (1757) as Mir Jafar betrayed his nawab and handed the victory to Clive, which in turn established the British as a political power in India, setting in motion a series of events that led to nearly two centuries of colonial rule.

As the colonial regime expanded into other parts of the subcontinent, Bania traders played an important supporting role. Even though British interests were primarily mercantile, there was ample space for local collaborators, a role aptly filled by these communities. Especially in the early decades of the East India Company's expansion, these local networks of finance were greatly valued by the British.

Later, as the British sought to monopolize the lucrative opium trade, it was Bania traders who made fortunes smuggling opium out of the territories of local rulers such the Scindias—who were British allies but beyond the full reach of colonial monopolistic rules.[18] However, rules of caste prevented Bania traders from going abroad, creating an opportunity for other communities, such as Parsis, who were ambitious and willing to travel to far-off lands such as China, to make fortunes for themselves.

This parochialism of Bania mercantilism—wherein they had no scruples about wheeling and dealing with and behind the backs of their patrons in pursuit of profit but gladly forfeited greater fortunes to avoid caste censure—has been very understudied. The commonly held maxim that the Bania community is good in business cannot be universally accepted as they have routinely demonstrated a willingness to forego profit rather than risk caste pollution.

Part of the reason for this is that some of the factors that uniquely positioned Banias to thrive in commerce derived their legitimacy from caste mandates themselves. The varna-based division of labour allocates a competition-free monopoly over commerce to the Bania communities, an arrangement that rests on staying clear of direct ruling class ambitions and acknowledging the spiritual hegemony of Brahmanism. Any deviation from this tightly woven fabric would have

denied these otherwise hyper-minority communities the massive political favour and market advantages they enjoyed.

Further, my closer examination of the sociocultural anthropology of Bania communities reveals patterns of closely guarded in-group behaviour that are heavily gatekept from 'outsiders'. In a pre-modern economy, this gatekeeping would include financial networks, accounting systems, ledger practices and even secret scripts, which would be passed down only within the community. Bania women often functioned virtually as banking collateral, used to secure commercial alliances within the community through marriage and opening lines of credit. It's a system that would not work without tight gatekeeping of community knowledge and networks within the caste.

It is no surprise that even today, Bania samaj is exceptionally nimble-footed and adept at coexisting with modern structures and ideologies while maintaining a firm grip on its youth. Agarwal, Maheshwari, Oswal and other Bania—especially Marwari—communities tend to have close-knit families with access to caste associations. These associations regularly organize events featuring not just religious preachers but also spiritually themed sessions that explain the contradictions of modernity to the youth and 'keep them within the fold'.

Unlike the Brahman–Kayastha systems, the Bania cultural consensus has not placed a premium on intellectual performance. As a result, it is a system where a form of 'un'-intellectualism is tolerated, even celebrated, as long as it is supported by fiscal and commercial success. This has been a long-standing fissure between Brahman and Bania systems. The former find the Banias simple-minded and without depth, while the latter consider Brahmans to be overly 'bookish', which, without accompanying wealth, is considered pointless.

In Calcutta, where I grew up, the claim on the city's identity rests between these two caste elites. The Marwari–Bania communities have their own network of schools (many of which were founded by Bania industrialists like the Birlas and Goenkas) and their own temples. They prefer sending their youth to colleges where the workload is light and attendance rules are lax, allowing for the young to chill, enjoy and focus on getting involved in '*dhanda*'. The studious ones are often encouraged to attempt chartered accountancy and company secretary examinations, both of which pertain to commercial systems.

Meanwhile, the Bengali Brahman–Kayastha elites of Calcutta—the proverbial 'bhadralok'—look down upon this whole ecosystem as well as the spatial concentrations of wholesale markets such as Burrabazar (which are Bania hubs). Their children are not a majority in the Birla schools, and for college, they prefer the more 'intellectual' institutions such as Jadavpur University, or they leave the state to study in top colleges in Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and elsewhere. The priority is exploring culture, politics and 'performing' intellectual depth, rather than chasing wealth.

These distinctions that I draw are exaggerated generalizations, and I myself can easily think of a hundred exceptions off the top of my head. Yet, these cultural fractures exist. I invoke these generalizations not to claim empirical certainty, but rather as breadcrumbs that may lure a curious reader or researcher to examine savarna systems *not* as a monolith. For many contradictions exist within savarna communities, along with a fair degree of mutual contempt and disdain.

In the era of modern commerce and technical education, many of these old generalizations no longer hold or have mutated into newer forms. It is not surprising, then, that the common vocabulary of caste critique tends to label the contemporary state as a 'Brahman–Bania' regime. Meanwhile, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, a strong undercurrent was evident in many parts of the country such as Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, where Kshatriya castes—such as Rajputs and Thakurs—felt ignored and disrespected. Such and similar discontent may have contributed to the BJP's poor performance in many regions, defying popular expectations. Internal realignments are reshaping modern India's savarna landscape even in the present day.

Noted anti-caste author and activist, Professor Kancha Ilaiah, refers to the Banias as 'social smugglers'.[19] It seems they have smuggled their way beyond their varna-mandated hierarchy by making themselves more useful to Brahmanism, which, in the age of corporate wealth, has far greater use for Banias than the largely rural power of landholding feudal Kshatriya/Rajputs or adjacent communities.

Corporate India, in its contemporary form—with its dense network of business schools, locally situated MNCs, state-sponsored IT parks and start-up hubs, an aggressively pro-market media, premium real estate boom and malls full of glamour brands—is a recent outgrowth

of this new Brahman–Bania alignment. This savarna reconfiguration is both a product of neoliberal market reforms and a backlash against the social justice clamour of 'Mandal politics'. It is a new vision of independent India, constructed because the older paternalistic 'mai-baap' state, which ruled through an overgrown Brahman–Kayastha bureaucracy and rural feudal power, was beginning to crack under the pressure of electoral mobilizations from below the glass floor.

By shifting the locus of power to the corporate sector and bestowing upon it the sheen of cultural aspiration and validation, the savarnas bought themselves more time. They paved the way for almost twenty years of a strong savarna–corporate state under the ruling government—a set-up that is now facing a strong backlash from the marginalized groups demanding the return of 'big welfare' from the state as evidenced by election results in the general elections of 2024 and subsequent state elections of Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi.

It is not possible to understand Modi's unexpected and unprecedented struggle in (and since) the 2024 Lok Sabha elections without examining the factors that led to the creation of his savarna–corporate state, its broad features and the one-dimensional world view of the millennial savarnas who led the charge.

3

The late 1990s onwards—the small blip of the 2008 recession notwithstanding—was an era of (compared to today) cheap business school fees, small batch sizes and rising placement packages (sometimes increasing by 20 to 30 per cent year-on-year). The MBA was suddenly the new dream degree. For a generation of young students, the Common Admission Test (CAT) was all that stood between them and earning lakhs of rupees—amounts of money that, in the preceding age of scarcity, even urban savarnas above the glass floor had toiled their whole lives to secure.

As business schools expanded their batch sizes and new ones popped up, the conversation on reservation and diversity in admissions and hiring was silenced. In fact, many savarna 'intellectuals' gleefully claimed that India's 'MBA revolution' was possible only because it was merit-based and free of reservation. How far that is true remains open to question, as this 'revolution' seems to

have been driven more by global capital shifts and neoliberal state policy than by any unique pedagogical innovation in these MBA programmes—and certainly not by the diktats of a caste-exclusionary admission policy. The MBA entrance exam typifies this.

The CAT as an exam has always had a relatively simple syllabus, relying more on the time crunch for competitive selection. Aspirants don't just have to find the correct answers, they have to do it in the shortest possible time to do well in the exam. This has led to the rise of a parallel industry of coaching centres, where students are taught 'shortcuts', tips and tricks to cut down their response time. Ultimately, doing well in the exam is not just a matter of knowledge or skill, but rather boils down to the practice of time management tips taught at these centres.

Access to these coaching centres has always been prohibitively expensive. When I wrote the CAT in 2005, these centres were already charging Rs 20,000 and upwards for preparation 'packages' ranging from three months to a year. These prices have only increased since then. In a country where a vast majority of families have an average monthly income of less than Rs 10,000, this essentially prices out everyone below the 'glass floor' from a shot at an MBA and upward mobility.

Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 2, poverty has multiple dimensions in a caste-segregated society like India. Accessing the money to train for the competitive exam is just one piece of the puzzle. A vast majority of people below the glass floor did not even know or understand what an MBA was and the possibilities it offered. It was very public yet very gatekept knowledge.

When I was preparing for the CAT, my father initially refused to support the coaching fees. In his world view, the only 'safe jobs' were in engineering or medicine. Even law was considered unstable or irrelevant. Like many in my milieu, I too had only ever seen lawyers either in Bollywood films or sitting on the pavement with typewriters under an umbrella, typing out legal documents. Neither archetype seemed particularly rich or influential. Only much later in life did I learn how powerful and elite a career in law could be. By comparison, an MBA was even 'newer' in the public imagination and hyped in the contemporary discourse of the time.

Elite savarnas, with their intergenerational literacy and connections

within academic and industry circles, quickly understood the value of an MBA. Meanwhile, a vast majority of talented marginalized individuals continued to toil to crack entrance examinations for public sector jobs in banking, railways or the civil services. The aggregated costs of socially stratifying knowledge and education were borne by tens of thousands of families who could have lifted themselves out of poverty. This was made worse by exclusionary admission policies in B-schools and a larger discourse that framed management as a 'merit-based' domain, free from interference and the encumbrances of caste and social justice policies.

This knowledge gap was further compounded by the fact that, at the time, only the top metropolitan cities had elite-tier teachers and coaching infrastructure, leading to a very heavy urban savarna bias in the MBA batches from the first decade of 2000s. This was further reinforced by the admission process itself.

The CAT was just the first step of the selection process; admission was contingent on a good performance in the 'Group Discussion and Personal Interview' (GD/PI) round. This was where rich savarnas who had studied in top-tier English-medium schools had a distinct advantage. Admission committees would routinely look for intangible, unverifiable criteria such as the 'X-factor', confidence and charisma—which essentially boiled down to fluent English-speaking, fashion sense and personal grooming. Often, the interview round would degenerate into outright intimidation, justified as preparing candidates for the 'stress' of the job.

For first-generation learners—those who had attended schools where spoken English was not the norm, and who lacked the money or cultural awareness to groom themselves in sync with formal fashion trends—this aggressive environment put them at a distinct disadvantage, as they were already operating from a place of very low confidence. To compensate, they would have to enrol for yet another coaching package—the 'GD/PI preparation package'—where they were taught body posture, hand gestures and other such inane criteria, none of which had anything to do with the academic or professional ability of the student.

In fact, so deeply is this belief internalized within the Indian corporate set-up that even today, mandatory formal dress codes remain commonplace in MBA programmes, where students are

expected to constantly 'perform' confidence via power poses and direct rhetorical speech (usually while delivering a fancy PowerPoint spectacle).

At a time when tech billionaires such as Zuckerberg, Musk and Bezos—whom management types idolize—are often seen in smart casuals, and when corporate culture itself has leaned towards flexibility, informality and breaking down hierarchical barriers, many Indian business schools still penalize students for not wearing formal clothes, ties or crisp suits to daily classes or invited talks featuring some industry figurehead.

Huddled together in stiff formal wear, unsuited for the local weather, sweating and suffocating, these young students resemble feckless, timid conformists rather than the bold, inspiring leaders of tomorrow that these institutions claim to be building. The overworking of students is mistaken for rigour, unquestioning absorption of outdated maxims and boring industry anecdotes is accepted as insight, and any deviation or critical interrogation of this is seen as a lack of seriousness or talent. Any talk of social justice and inclusion, especially based on caste, is considered political or worse, 'anti-business'.

Despite this hostility in the pedagogical culture of management programmes and the lack of reservations in private management colleges, several SC/ST/OBC students did get into MBA programmes. However, in the absence of any critical, introspective pedagogy as part of their management training, many ended up epistemically internalizing the savarna world view. It is not uncommon to find many such Dalit Bahujan MBAs—all incredibly successful in their fields—still pinning the onus of personality development, 'skill enhancement' and gaining cultural polish upon marginalized students. Many will still say, 'Look at me, I could do it, so can you'—an approach that effectively absolves the unequal educational system of its lack of accessibility and instead puts the pressure on marginalized students to 'improve themselves'.

This is another dimension of the monolithic savarna culture—whether in management, sciences/engineering, law or liberal arts, the marginalized SC/ST/OBC student or professional finds themselves isolated and disconnected from any material recognition of the world they grew up in. When they enter these spaces of 'success', they see

nothing, hear nothing, from the world they came from. Instead, they undergo a training in reversal, a socialization into the opposite.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many SC/ST public sector employees posted in small industrial towns such as Bokaro or Korba had to 'blend in', or better yet, internalize the world view of their savarna colleagues and bosses. This meant leading kirtans, organizing havans and the like in their colonies to appease their bosses. Assertion, even in the form of silence or absence—let alone direct opposition—was noted, remembered and became instrumental in structural petty vengeance. However, many such marginalized employees of that era were mobilized into deep politics by organizations such as the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), built by the massive efforts of Saheb Kanshiram.

Unlike that generation, today's management ecosystem has broadly stripped young SC/ST/OBC professionals and students of such agency. Most have been savarna-washed by the lure of a mythical 'caste-less' market and by the fear of defying its laws. Thus, it is not uncommon to find marginalized caste MBAs—who studied in these business schools in the late 1990s and 2000s—expressing deep resentment towards 'caste politics', especially during their early career days.

This was happening in an era when Bahujan politics was at its peak, led by figures such as Mayawati, and social justice leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mulayam Singh and others held immense sway in national politics. It was during this period that many important inclusive social policy provisions were pioneered. The expansion of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and central universities along with the implementation of OBC reservation in admissions was a major innovation in education and professional training, as was the launch of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) and Right to Education (RTE) schemes. Yet, despite this seismic churning, business schools and corporate India largely framed these as regressive developments and clamoured for 'strong' leadership. The Bahujan political collective—belonging to communities that had been locked out of power for centuries—bargaining and securing social rights was seen as a takeover of democratic institutions by a rabble mob. The near total savarna monopoly in academic leadership, industry discourse and business

media wiped out any possibility of a whole generation of MBAs interpreting the changing landscape of India through any lens other than that of the elite savarnas.

Many predictions from that era—regarding an imminent airline boom, real estate development, Tata Nano transforming the automobile sector and growth in tier-two cities and the unlocking of the rural 'masses' via the powers of mobile telephony—have not materialized. Yet, there has been no course correction or introspection within India Inc., which continues to hold all its assumptions, predictions, wisdom, habits and expectations, norms and ideologies as axiomatic truths. This has created a major fracture between the market and its potential consumers, an overwhelming section of whom live beneath the glass floor. After almost three decades of liberal market reforms, despite all the self-proclaimed industry geniuses and gurus, India remains a five- to six-city market for a vast majority of premium products.

4

Like it or not, even today, south Asia's material economy is deeply entrenched in caste-based labour. White-collar industries that require high-level technical education are dominated by Brahmans (owing to generations of cultural and material privilege), finance and start-up economies are dominated by Banias, while gruelling, 'unskilled' physical labour is always the burden of marginalized SC/ST/OBCs.

In most city neighbourhoods, especially on the newly urbanizing outskirts—the very land upon which luxury housing projects are built has usually been usurped from such caste marginalized folks. The workforce that builds these luxury developments is hired as contract labour, always without any insurance or leave rights, and hails predominantly from semi-nomadic, de-notified tribe (DNT) and SC backgrounds in many cities.

Sanitation work in these housing societies is almost exclusively carried out by SCs, who are frequently aggregated by contractors from dominant OBC communities. Neighbourhood grocery stores are often run by middle-class Bania families with roots in Rajasthan. Petty laundries and salons are the reserve SCs (often from UP or Bihar), while the humble chicken shops are managed by Pasmanda Muslim

castes. Posh restaurants and pubs are owned by Brahman or Bania capital (usually a fourth- or fifth-generation, educated, 'irreverent' type from a lineage of successful professionals or entrepreneurs), while the waitstaff and kitchen workers are inevitably Bahujans from Bengal, Odisha or Assam.

These are not mere conjectures but patterns replicated across major Indian cities, with only minor variations owing to geographic dispersion. Yet, management education is silent on this easily observable mosaic of capital and labour movement and stratifications.

The instruments of capital and credit that built the backbone of India's real-world political economy—such as hawala, hundi, parcha, etc.—were the preserve of caste-linked informal and cloaked banking systems. Yet, no MBA programme covers their history or impact on shaping the Indian economy.

When the Supreme Court, in a landmark judgement, forced the State Bank of India to reveal the details of electoral bond purchasers—a scheme initiated by the BJP government that allowed corporations to anonymously donate huge sums of money to political parties—it exposed an enormous parallel economy of corporate donations.[20] Journalists and activists of all hues were quick to analyse the data and uncovered clear patterns of quid pro quo relations between donors and state policy. Often, the donations were also linked to relief from investigative agencies looking into corporate fraud.

Interestingly, almost none of the major Indian business school programmes looked into these revelations or reacted in an official capacity. No major conferences or seminars were organized to unpack the issue or what it meant in the context of doing business in India. It is unlikely that any of this will be part of the curriculum or training for young students—apart from some professors who may include select readings on their own initiative. This begs the question: does a finance MBA truly not require in-depth knowledge on this?

Savarna MBAs will laugh at jokes by savarna comics (many of whom, incidentally, are also sourced from the stock of engineers and/or MBA graduates from the early 2000s) about how members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) are bought and sold daily. But who are these MLAs? A vast majority of them are businessmen, contractors and real estate magnates, whose profits fund the electoral rise and fall of political parties and dictate public policy.

Should this not be a subject of introspection, discussion and research within management training circles? Especially considering that astronomical amounts of black money are locked up in agribusiness, real estate, mining and infrastructure—all key economic sectors. Are the captains of India Inc., teachers and the MBA start-up ecosystem not going to address the rising tide of political mobilization against crony capitalism? Will there be no discussion on social equality and the role of business in building a stronger national citizenry—especially when the same national interest is invoked by savarna capitalists to demand longer work hours for lesser pay from their employees?

Most Indian business school programmes treat the political and economic spheres as distinctly separate. As a result, millennial savarna MBAs—who today occupy mid- to top-level management positions in major corporations—have little to no understanding of the interconnections between political activity and the business world.

A cursory look at the LinkedIn feeds of older savarna MBAs—who now head corporate communications, advertising and digital marketing firms—reveals many of them gushing over obscure advertising campaigns from across the world. Terms like ‘innovation’, ‘game-changing’, etc. are routinely thrown around for campaigns that have no real ground application in India. In fact, from my experience in the media and advertising industry, most savarna MBAs have a very low opinion of the brands and campaigns they work on. They all want to do ‘creative’ work but are stymied because their clients’ customers are ‘not ready’ for good work. Many a strategy planner thinks of himself as a neo-Don Draper—or more contemporarily, as a desi Elon Musk. Even more either already host inane podcasts or want to start one to emulate their hero, Joe Rogan. What is interesting is that none of their cultural reference points circle back to the non-savarna audiences that live beyond the bubble of their elite, urbanized lives. This is perhaps why no major brands have ever built a campaign around Babasaheb Ambedkar Jayanti, preferring instead to clog the already cluttered festival dates.

The human resources (HR) side of India Inc., like all other aspects of corporate business in India, is helmed by savarnas and has shaped deeply disappointing employee policies across the modern corporate landscape. Forget diversity hiring based on caste, most organizations

have a terrible record when it comes to ensuring the safety and dignity of even savarna women and queer individuals. HR departments have done little to rein in the fragile masculine chauvinism of savarna men and the 'dude-bro' culture that it has evolved into.

Almost no firm pays fair wages to its interns and service staff, and work hours have bled into weekends as well as daily late nights. Employees are expected to remain available via phone or laptop, at home or on vacation (which is increasingly difficult to take as leave approvals have become harder to acquire). As compensation, these firms will employ inane employee motivation tactics such as monthly birthday cakes, an annual Women's Day celebration, or at best, distributing a small box of sweets on Diwali. While the motivational impact of such token gestures is debatable, the punishment for swiping in late at work or something similar is disproportionately high.

The business model, especially in marketing and communications firms, is built on the exploitation of cheap intern labour who are often paid in 'learning' and not money. While this is not a barrier to entry for wealthy savarnas, most marginalized folks are unable to commit to working without sustainable pay, leading to more exclusion.

The service staff is almost always hired via contractors, absolving HR of any liability towards them. The very architecture of most office spaces lacks designated areas for the rest and dignity of such staff. Lakhs of Bahujans who toil daily in IT parks, office complexes and co-working spaces across the country—providing cleaning, security and other essential services—have to sit quietly under staircases, in cabinets, storerooms or toilets, to have their lunch. Only an exclusionary system like Brahmanism, which is built on obfuscating and dehumanizing service labour, could normalize the utter lack of human sensitivity in corporate India today.

Interestingly, in 2015–16, the Essar leaks exposed a whole chain of emails between the company's HR departments discussing how to accommodate informal requests for favours by leading politicians. This included the then President, Pranab Mukherjee, getting Essar to hire his granddaughter and the son of a spiritual 'guruji'.[21] Hiring rules, it would seem, operate differently for disenfranchised SCs, STs and OBCs—but no MBA curriculum in India, especially those focusing

on HR, appears interested in addressing this reality.

In most societies plagued by the ills of late capitalism-induced globalization, there is usually a strong parallel discourse led by either right- or left-wing mobilization. In India, however, both the liberal left and conservative right discourses are led by Brahman, Kayastha and other such savarna interlocutors. This results in a bizarre alchemy of narratives, wherein the diagnosis of social issues and their proposed solutions are never relevant to vast sections of caste-marginalized populations. Indeed, both the right and left exhibit a major tendency to import discursive points from the West, even as the same Brahman–Kayastha academic complex regurgitates the mantra of decolonizing knowledge epistemology ad nauseam.

In effect, we are left with a peculiar generation of MBAs, whose bravado-laden talk about technocratic fantasies of nation-building have now seeped into the speeches of the prime minister as well as the highest echelons of policymaking. Since 2014, there has been much talk of smart cities, 'aspirational districts', the gig economy and Make in India. However, it is safe to say that as of 2022, the cities are not 'smart', the start-up bubble has collapsed, their apps did not solve endemic social problems, and the exploitation of gig economy workers at companies like Zomato, Swiggy and Urban Company has made national headlines.

Even the most partisan commentators now admit that most of these initiatives have not delivered as promised. Instead, the 'business geniuses' of this era are constantly in the news for their out-of-touch and often casteist, anti-poor views. Figures like Narayana Murthy, Bhavish Aggarwal (Ola Cabs), Deepinder Goyal (Zomato) and Ashneer Grover (BharatPe) are increasingly being called out, ridiculed and slammed on social media. Many of India Inc.'s great success stories over the past decade—Paytm, BYJU'S, Unacademy, Dunzo, Oyo, etc.—are either cutting jobs, struggling or have shut down.

Political parties like the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) in Telangana, which invested heavily in incubation hubs for start-ups—offering an almost nanny-state-like environment for MBA entrepreneurs—have faced public backlash for such skewed priorities. In a state where unemployment rates among postgraduates and youth with higher education are nearly double the national average, the government was flexing its 'incubation innovations', such as a blockchain solution for

chit funds. The failure to add meaningful jobs, especially outside Hyderabad, is now considered a major reason for BRS losing power in the very state it took credit for creating.

This lopsided, urban-centric, big-business-focused policy model is exactly what led to the dramatic collapse of Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party regime in 2004. History repeats itself in Hyderabad.

Yet, the MBAs refuse to learn.

In many state elections and in national politics, the massive electorate beneath the glass floor is consistently sending strong signals that they want their aspirations to be taken seriously, they want vision and growth and jobs and dignity—preferably within their own native spaces, and not just in posh suburbs, Delhi or metropolitan centres. These are jobs that big Bania capital has either refused to create or been completely unable to.

Yet, instead of engaging in a sobering, soul-searching review, the millennial savarna MBA generation is aggressively peddling the same solutions and the same buzzwords with the same hype—like a wind-up toy stuck in a single gear, rattling forward mindlessly. A gormless, dull-witted goon, bereft of charm or gentleness, hell-bent on bludgeoning any and all naysayers with the same aggressive, loaded technobabble.

And so it is that today, when global consumer faith in MNCs is at an all-time low, when their billionaire owners are no longer seen as role models but as out-of-touch elites responsible for destabilizing economies and wrecking the planet, the savarna MBA still walks into the room like it is 2007. For an academic discipline that is so obsessed with 'staying ahead of the curve', management pedagogy in India has remained strangely static, bereft of imagination and utterly deaf to the rapidly changing socio-economic climate.

The arrogant dismissal of the social sciences by management professionals and professors alike has resulted in a discipline that increasingly bears no real-world relevance to the 'job market' it is 'farming' its students out to. At a time when management professors should be grappling with the aftershocks of three decades of unrestrained neoliberal accumulation globally—leading to massive social unrest, economic precarity, environmental devastation and widespread disillusionment with 'pro-big-business' political elites—the

savarna MBA still pretends these variables are simply not relevant to their day-to-day operations. Any attempt to theorize on the same is dismissed as being overly sensitive and not being 'tough enough' to tolerate the mythical 'real world' of business.

This has created a pedagogy in India that produces one-dimensional managers—whose WhatsApp is deeply political but whose LinkedIn is a sanitized celebration of asinine corporate milestones. Where boldness is required to respond to the ever-changing workplace, you get a manager who is cringingly subservient to the status quo and whose only method of crisis management is to pretend there is no crisis. Even as vast masses of excluded SC/ST/OBCs heave and expand in the shadows, corporate India struggles with its stagnation and mediocrity—in large measure due to the millennial savarna MBAs.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a recurring character trope in popular culture was the savarna 'clerk'. He was always depicted as being stuck in a stagnant job, a cringing lickspittle to his bosses and bureaucratic to a fault. This archetype has been lampooned endlessly.

Twenty years from now, how will this current crop of MBAs be seen in retrospect? Will they be remembered as a generation of loud-mouthed, technobabble-spouting, Allen Solly formal-wear-flaunting MBAs—who were ultimately utterly timid, totally subservient and unimaginatively boring in their roles? Will they be seen as the true successors to the *sarkari* clerk of the 1970s?

Or will the millennial MBA be considered not even worthy of that? At least the clerk was often shown to not be taking his job seriously, aware of its meaninglessness. Unlike the millennial savarna MBAs, whose all-in commitment to their roles is comical to anyone outside their bubble—the only reason people are not openly laughing at them is because they have managed to convince the world that they are 'successful'.

But as the cracks grow, as the bubble collapses, the laughter will become louder. A generation that started out to '*karlo duniya mutthi mein*', is winding down, falling on their faces and becoming the subject of thousands of memes mocking their fundamentally limited and unimaginative world view.

* * *

4

Student of the Year

Time moves differently if you are a teacher. The nature of the academic cycle means that you repeat similar themes over and over again, often teaching the same courses to different groups of students. While the curriculum evolves over time through a constant cycle of reviews, additions and a gradual erosion of context and relatability, by and large, seasoned teachers learn to expect reactions and responses from their classes.

However, every now and then, something unexpected comes up in a lecture, catching you off guard. This happened to me in 2022. It was a post COVID-19, undergraduate class in an elite private university, populated entirely by savarna students, predominantly from Brahman and Bania backgrounds. During class in some context, I happened to mention the Gujarat riots and massacres of 2002. I was used to strong reactions elicited at the mention of the same. What took me completely by surprise was that my young students had no clue what I was referring to.

Having spent my formative years in the 2000s and early 2010s, when the events and outcomes of 2002 shaped not just political discussions but also the rise of Narendra Modi as a national icon, I was witness to it being a deeply embedded cultural moment with resonance and widespread discussion. Across ideological spectrums, over the next decade, the impacts of 2002 were loudly discussed either as critiques or as endorsements. Indifference was not on the menu.

In fact, by the time the 2014 Lok Sabha elections drew near, polarization was near total. It was arguably India's first general election to be intensely fought online. Led by the BJP and, to a lesser extent, the newly emergent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), social media

platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter (now X) were used extensively and innovatively. Even the mainstream media, especially TV news—already beginning its descent from journalism to the meme-worthy reality-television-style drama series that it is now mostly synonymous with—had pivoted to a blatantly partisan role.

It seemed that whether you liked it or not, no one was immune from being drenched in the 'Modi wave' that had swept over the zeitgeist. And inextricably linked to it was the question of how to contextualize 2002. Was it the early opportunism of an ambitious regional politician now redefining himself as the development-oriented prime minister that the nation desperately needed? Or was it the precursor of his true agenda and leanings, which were now being masked under the image of a growth-oriented, corporate-savvy national leader? In 2014, regardless of what position you took in this debate, neither Modi's biggest supporters nor his fiercest critics could have predicted that from the flames of such a polarizing and rabid debate would emerge—in less than a decade—an elite youth who did not even know of this debate. Who were indifferent, ignorant and largely oblivious to what was probably the most hotly contested political and social debate in India since the turn of the century.

And yet here we are.

* * *

In 2024, there were estimated to be over 900 international curriculum schools operating in India. Some sources suggest that the actual number may be twice that. Most of the top schools in this category charge upwards of Rs 5 lakh per year in fees, especially for senior years. The really elite ones, such as the Dhirubhai Ambani International School in Mumbai, can cost almost double that.

In a country with cosmic levels of crushing poverty below the glass floor, the proliferation of such schools over the past two decades has been largely overlooked by the savarna media. Only rarely do they make the news—and when they do, it is usually for celebrity-related reasons. For instance, the debut performance of Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Abhishek Bachchan's daughter, Aaradhya, at a school function in the aforementioned Ambani school. The clip went viral—not only for the young girl's spirited performance but also for the Broadway musical-level set design.

In 2021, ‘education consultants’ Viral Doshi and Mridula Malasute co-edited a book featuring eighty-five essays from Indian students accepted into Ivy League and similarly elite institutions. Each essay featured the student’s school and the college they were admitted to—nearly half of these students were from the Dhirubhai Ambani International School. Almost universally, the students were elite savarnas.

It is this network and the promise of circulating in elite social circles that makes even wealthy savarnas break the bank to put their children through such schools. And as the ‘promise’ becomes bolder and bolder, the fees rise as well, to the point where even the rich struggle to keep up. For instance, in 2024, a report from Hyderabad claimed that parents were upset with an elite school for charging Rs 3.7 lakh per year for lower kindergarten. There was much discussion on social media about how the fees charged by such schools had reached unreasonable levels. Oddly, the angle missed by the coverage was that the outrage was not over the concept of paying such exorbitant fees, it was over the fee hike itself. Parents had already been paying Rs 2.4 lakh per year—it was only the steep rise that got them agitated enough for the story to be picked up by the media.

According to the report on ‘The State of Inequality in India’—generated by the Institute for Competitiveness at the behest of the Economic Advisory Council to the prime minister—90 per cent of Indians earn less than Rs 25,000 per month. In this context, a school charging Rs 2.4 lakh per year—or roughly Rs 20,000 per month—for lower kindergarten is abnormally high. So, what exactly is being taught in these schools that is worth lakhs of rupees per year? Why are parents (unhappily and grumbling) still paying these absurdly high fees? More pertinently, *who* are the parents lining up to do so?

As in the case of the school in Hyderabad, many such institutions justify the high fees by branding themselves as ‘international’ schools. This essentially means that their syllabus is set by a global educational non-profit. In India, the most popular curricula followed by such ‘international’ schools are IB (International Baccalaureate) and IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education), offered under the aegis of the CIE (University of Cambridge International Examinations). There are other internationally affiliated boards as well whose course structures and pedagogy are offered by select

'international schools'. A case often made for the superiority of such curricula and pedagogy over the available options is that our local education training and content is outdated, archaic and does not equip students for modern careers. If this is so—and there is certainly validity to this argument—then surely the solution lies in updating our curricula and pedagogical frameworks or universalizing international frameworks for all children. In the Indian context, neither has happened. Instead, the 'international' school has emerged as a narrow gatekept marker of 'eliteness' masquerading in the guise of academic 'excellence'. It is this elusive tag that savarna parents are desperate to bestow upon their children—so desperate that paying lakhs for lower kindergarten is also tolerable.

The overall merits and demerits of these international curricula are best left to researchers of pedagogy and education. What they represent in the context of Indian society and how they are implemented is of greater concern to us here.

2

Most Indian institutions of learning—schools, colleges, universities and the innumerable coaching centres for entrance exams—proudly declare their adherence to the '*guru–shishya parampara*', or the teacher–student tradition. While this tradition has many interpretations across different philosophical schools, the one that has come to largely connote student–teacher relations within the post-colonial savarna Indian paradigm is predominantly a Brahmanical simplification. So, what exactly is a 'guru' in this context, and what kind of 'shishya' do they produce?

The most commonly cited story of this tradition is that of Dronacharya and Eklavya from the Mahabharat. Dronacharya, a Brahman, is the guru to the Pandav and Kaurav royal kin. It is not an educational institution open to all; admission is based solely on caste birth and royal recommendation.

However, Eklavya, a tribal forest-dwelling boy, is able to self-study his way to outclassing the guru's star pupils, solely based on lessons he has overheard. Dronacharya's response on discovering this is revealing. In the familiar climax of the story, the guru demands *dakshina* (fees) from Eklavya, even though he never physically or

willingly taught the boy. The devoted student, nonetheless, promises to oblige. The fee demanded was that Eklavya cut off his right thumb, maiming himself—thus ensuring that the guru's favourite student, Arjun, emerges as the 'best' archer. In effect, also ensuring that the caste hierarchy remains intact.

Thus, talent and merit outside the mandated boundaries of caste privilege are not acceptable in a caste-segregated society and must be 'cut down' and kept at the margins. As I mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), keeping people in their place, at their level, below the glass floor is something primal and instinctive within this culture. It is rooted in its very ethos. It is their very dharma.

This maintenance of 'levels' or establishing and carefully curating hierarchies is an innate aspect of savarna culture. Brahmanism, the central animating philosophy behind various savarna systems, is essentially a performance of knowledge supremacy. It is, historically, a myth that Brahmans have been knowledge producers; instead, their main skill has been 'performing' knowledge and validating other groups and social actions. Their anthropological reproduction is centred around this social performance of knowledge, which is the impetus for their self-perception—both individually and collectively—as elevated above the rest of society. It is an ever-changing, ever-mutating tapestry of elaborate social practices and rituals, which not only mandate levels of 'existence' but also dictate the levels up to which transgression may be permissible. Eklavya went too far. His excellence exposed the lack of it in the chosen elites of the day. Today, such transgressions spare the thumb but break the mind. A deep cultural inferiority is incepted and defeatism is encouraged in the psyche of persons from marginalized backgrounds. So much so that the very sight of the architecture of elite schools, universities and corporate offices can be massively intimidating. The self-worth of the individual thus becomes tied to the level of institution they belong to.

It is in this context that elite savarnas have built for themselves a network of institutions—not just schools but also private universities—that have proliferated in the last fifteen years. Within these spaces, a certain 'level' is maintained to gatekeep the marginalized—both physically (via steep fees) and mentally (via psychological submission).

Whether or not these institutions are truly producing talented

students and future leaders is debatable. What they have successfully done, however, is create a new tier of student, one who is accepted as elite simply by virtue of belonging to that level. In the modern age, to understand the legacy of an existing generation of elite savarnas and the future they have set up, one need only examine the so-called most elite 'level' they have established in their time.

In the pre-Independence era, British-run convent schools and institutions like Banaras Hindu University, Allahabad University and Aligarh Muslim University were considered aspirational and seen as centres of excellence. There was a nativist push to develop non-British-facing local traditions of knowledge production. Thus, many also passed through Shantiniketan, Gandhian camps or religious *math/ ashrams* to gain a grounded touch. Of course, many of the true savarna elites—including Jawaharlal Nehru and later Indira Gandhi, who took over the actual leadership of the nation—were educated overseas.

These institutional experiences were unimaginable to a vast majority of Indians. Perhaps it was these exclusive experiences that fostered a belief within this cohort that India, too, needed to develop similar great institutions. Thus emerged a bizarre project of fostering 'islands of excellence'—such as the mighty IITs and IIMs—in a country where the overall literacy rate at the end of colonial rule was a mere 18 per cent in 1951. This rate was even lower among the marginalized communities—where it was in the single digits. Defenders of such initiatives often applaud the boldness of the imagination for 'daring to dream' of excellence in a society that was mired in the clutches of poverty. This is precisely the kind of logic that only someone above the glass floor could have. For if you were shaped below the glass floor, such a vision does not sound daring, it sounds irresponsible and even dangerous.

In the 1960s, India—which had opted for a mixed economy based on centralized planning and a limited private sector—set up not just one but two IIMs, investing heavily in training faculty under the guidance of advisors from the US. Such a decision, made at great cost, should have been subject to a public audit or assessment. A third IIM was opened in Bangalore in 1973. There was an effort to steer it towards focusing primarily on the myriad public sector undertakings (PSUs), which had already begun to show the issues typical to statist, centralized industrial undertakings. An influx of trained professional

managers may have been the need of the hour. However, shortly after its commencement, the new institution decided not to 'limit itself' to PSUs. Most IIM graduates and faculty, whose numbers were small owing to small class sizes, were highly coveted as consultants for the private sector. Instead of breaking new ground in pedagogical innovation or nation-building via revitalizing PSUs, many private fortunes were made through such collaborations.

The IITs, though larger in scope than the IIMs, demonstrated a similar academic culture of inward-looking gatekeepers who zealously guarded access to their spaces. Any attempt to decentralize or expand the IIT network was resisted. The faculty and administrators were all savarna, predominantly Brahman. Ajantha Subramanian, in *The Caste of Merit*, demonstrates that in the 1960s, these institutions were overwhelmingly occupied by elite savarnas, who often denied that caste was a major factor influencing social exchange and learning in such spaces, even as many had arrived at these institutions from elite schools of the day and upon graduation, would routinely migrate to the US.

In non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) domains, institutions like the Indian School of International Studies (ISIS) had already been set up under the aegis of Brahman academic overseers to serve as focused feeders for the young nation's statecraft needs. In the cases of ISIS, it was the need for expertise in international affairs to aid foreign policy planning. Later, the newly created Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) absorbed this institute and came to be recognized as an A-list institution in its own right. Similarly, institutions such as St Stephens College in Delhi—which had been colonial bastions—were gradually co-opted by savarna elites, producing a small stream of hyper-connected folks who immediately slotted into prominent roles.

Being part of any of these institutions was unthinkable for the vast majority of Indians. For the small hyper-minority who had the access, ambition and support to walk into these spaces, the institutional 'label' was for life. It was a small community, often hand-picked, groomed and set up to be future leaders. Thus, within a few decades of Independence, the savarna Indian state had successfully created a new layer of 'prestigious' spaces where one's 'potential' was determined by where one graduated from and who recommended

them afterwards. By the 1980s, when Indira Gandhi's son, Rajiv Gandhi, took over the government, his core inner circle was notoriously known as the 'Doon Cabinet' because many ministers and high-ranking officials were alumni of the Doon School in Dehradun (now in Uttarakhand), which was established in 1935.

The Doon School itself was an effort by Satish Ranjan Das to create an Indian school modelled on the lines of the hyper-elite British 'public' schools such as Eton and Harrow, which produced generations of colonists and are deeply associated with the British ruling class even today. Das had studied in the UK in the late 1800s and aspired to recreate a similar exclusionary ruling elite set-up in India as a form of nativist identity assertion.

Having risen to the position of advocate general of Bengal under British rule, it is perhaps safe to assume that his social priorities, aesthetics and imagination were not too threatening to colonial interests. Hence, after decades of lobbying, he was permitted to establish the school he so deeply desired—and in due course, it succeeded in producing exactly the kind of wards he wanted—out of touch, ruling savarna elites who came to symbolize power, narcissism and being above the law. This was not a circle you could simply study your way into (even as a savarna yourself). You had to be born into the very top tier of society to get in.

A lesser-understood and under-researched aspect of the massive churn caused by the subaltern electoral political revolution of the 1970s and 1980s is the role played by the popular revulsion towards such elites and their fundamentally flawed (and often violent) methods of resolving endemic social issues such as poverty. The massive slum removal programmes and forced sterilization of marginalized communities for population control during the Emergency were among the most egregious, though certainly not isolated, instances of these perverse autocratic fantasies.

As the light touch of the paternalistic state increasingly gave way to a petulant, impatient and oppressive face, marginalized communities began to assert themselves in opposition, refusing to meekly accept this new creed of 'educated elite masters'. Despite the challenges posed by capital, organization and the state machinery and its policy arms, mass politicians emerged, mobilizing this popular discontent. This was an era when massive caste alliances were attempted,

formulas were devised based on population percentages and social engineering strategies were innovated to overcome the insurmountable odds of facing off against the ruling savarna elites.

Until this point, post-Independence India had functioned as a coalition between hyper-elite savarnas, who controlled major institutions of power, knowledge-production and policy, and rural landowning savarna elites, who maintained control through feudal power. The social churn and mass movements of the 1970s and 1980s threatened to electorally upend the hegemony of the latter. Rural and often backward castes, scheduled caste and tribal leaders spearheaded some of the most innovative political and electioneering planning to counter the increasingly hostile feudal arm of the state.

Under siege thus, a new model was needed by the elite savarnas. A new social order had to be created—one that could not be stormed through the strength of marginalized votes alone.

3

By 1991, the contradictions within the Indian state boiled over and forced a hard reset. The government had proven itself incapable of being an efficient, honest or fair overseer of the Indian economy. Instruments of regulation had rotted into means of extortion, bullying and intimidation as bureaucratic red tape spread far and wide.

Feudal rural control was slipping against the onslaught of Shudra castes, many of whom were demanding reservation and representation as ‘other backward classes’. The Ambedkarite mission, started by Kanshiram and supported by Mayawati, had blossomed into the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which electrified not just SC voters but also large sections of other marginalized populations.

Against this backdrop, the Congress, then the party of choice for savarna elites, tried to communalize politics, but even this opening was seized by the BJP. Unlike the Congress, the BJP was unencumbered by the task of managing the paternal expectations of various minority religious and caste groups. It could proudly project its Hindu identity as its core politics in a way the Congress could not.

In a final blow, during the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a suicide bomber affiliated with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This was a fallout of India’s

peacekeeping intervention in the Sri Lankan civil war—one of the many foreign and domestic debacles of the preceding decade, which had left fires raging across Kashmir, Punjab, Assam and Nagaland as well as widespread resentment in many other regions.

In these dire circumstances, and with a looming economic crisis, the then Congress prime minister, Narasimha Rao, decided to reboot the Indian economy. Engineered by Manmohan Singh, the state dramatically withdrew from directly overseeing business sectors and large private corporations. The dreaded red tape of the license raj was dismantled, and with it went the power of the clerical bureaucracy that had run it. The market doors were flung open for big foreign capital to invest, and the currency was devalued. Until recently, all of these moves, big and small, were universally hailed as radically transformative, credited with saving India and setting it on the path to greatness. This was easy to believe for a while.

The symbols of statist bureaucratic power quickly receded from the public gaze. In came the fruits of the market. The most visible among them was certainly the television revolution. The transition from the state-run Doordarshan to cable satellite channels provided a dramatic, daily reminder to the people that things were changing. Brands like Coca-Cola made a comeback in the Indian market, and within a few years, malls emerged. Coffee shops, new models of cars and motorcycles, different brands of jeans, an advertising revolution, the reinvention of newspapers, McDonalds and multiplexes—much of this 'revolution' has been extensively covered in savarna commentaries. It is usually complimentary, and now that enough time has passed, the same has become the subject of extensive positive-nostalgia farming.

From the gaze of the people below the glass floor, liberalization looked a little different. There was both anxiety and opportunity. Much of what was now on offer still remained out of our reach. I remember growing up during those years. In most articles and books today, economic liberalization is spoken of as if it was an instantaneous process. It was not. It took many long years for changes to manifest or even become visible to someone like myself. In those years, very little information filtered down to us about how to position ourselves to benefit from these changes.

My father's interest in computers was piqued during this era. He understood they were the future, but exactly how and in what way, he

never quite figured out. I remember seeing similar struggles all around us. A neighbourhood video library, which also occasionally lent out its video cassette player (VCP), worried it would soon go out of business. Many of its usual clients were families who would hire the VCP for a day to rewatch wedding cassettes, gathering at the house of the one person who had a functioning TV set. It was a community activity of sorts. But who would watch old cassettes when there was cable TV now? The chamra-haat folks were worried that big stores would open, and no one would buy chappals from the street. Many of these anxieties were justified, more were exaggerated, but no one knew the extent of anything.

To be fair, many savarnas did not know much more either. However, the capacity of their systems to process and pivot with the changes—especially among the wealthier and urban elite—put them at a distinct advantage. It was the combined, often invisible and diffused, effect of kinship networks, exposure to broader economic and cultural patterns, and the space and foresight afforded by access to generational capital that ultimately put them ahead—an advantage that is now often spoken of under the umbrella term ‘privilege’.

Banias, especially, with their closely run traditional family businesses, transitioned smoothly into corporate capital within a decade. There was no great upheaval within the community against the new ways of business and the loss of the old methods—only opportunity. They swiftly entered spaces that the paternal state had receded from.

By the 2000s, big global capital also began to enter some of these spaces. Commercial real estate boomed in Mumbai, as it did in Bangalore, and to an extent, in Hyderabad with the expansion of the IT industry, which piggybacked off global offshoring trends. Gurgaon developed soon after into the glass, steel and cement monstrosity it is known for today.

As MNCs and rapidly corporatizing Bania ‘lala’ organizations set up shop, there was a massive demand for technical labour. The small pipelines of elite savarnas was nowhere near fulfilling the demand. The era of ‘old boys’ clubs’ and aristocratic cohorts, emerging from a handful of schools and colleges to run the levers of power, was winding down. These savarna elites who had been shadow figures in the previous system, whose very name was a symbol of power, now

retreated into their clubs and prime real estate enclaves or went overseas—as the market demanded a new kind of 'boss'.

However, the growing insignificance of the old model of hand-picked elites did not lead to a market-driven utopia of opportunities for the marginalized. In the previous chapter, I discussed the proliferation of business schools and how the lack of knowledge, access and capital needed to prepare for and crack entrance exams as well as a myriad of other factors ensured that these new opportunities remained largely confined to urban India and within the reach of a certain savarna 'middle class'. I use the term 'middle class' with caution, because they appear so only in the selectively myopic gaze of savarnas themselves—yet, compared to the collective national average of the era, they would be classified as rich both in wealth and in caste and kinship capital. This cohort led the 'revolution'.

In addition to the business schools, the mushrooming of engineering colleges fed India Inc. with lakhs of 'trained professionals' every year. Perhaps this expansion of opportunities—from a select few savarna families occupying neo-nobility status to a larger cross section of savarnas who, through education, could place themselves at the head of industry and commerce—explains why so many savarna commentators view this transition with romantic fondness. It is also, perhaps, where their generational mythology of being 'self-made' comes from.

However, missing from these favourable savarna reviews of this period is the fact that it was entirely inadequate in either skilling or employing enough youth to make a serious dent in the absolute numbers of unemployment and poverty in the country. A giant IT campus sprawling over hundreds of acres, employing tens of thousands of software engineers, does not add much in a society where unemployment figures are in the tens of crores.

However, the IT workers and MBA graduates spurred an unparalleled luxury real estate boom in India—a sector where undeclared, often illicit money is deeply intertwined with political mobilization at the local and regional levels. Cities were transformed into fantasy paradises, filled with gated communities, gardens and swimming pools. Wealthy savarnas made speculative flat purchases in such communities, becoming rent-seekers while squeezing out low-income housing options, which were relegated to a 'lower' cadre of

employees—those engaged in providing service to the newly mobile savarna elites. In fact, everything in the city, from flyovers to home-delivery apps, was designed to cater to the needs of this cohort. Meanwhile, a much larger section of marginalized folks was put into jobs to keep their luxury-convenience system operational.

By the time the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government implemented 27 per cent reservation for OBCs in higher education in 2006, applicable to IITs, IIMs, and other elite state and central universities, this cultural cohort of newly wealthy, educated savarnas was at the forefront of opposing social justice reform as fundamentally anti-market and anti-merit. The English-language media, the newly active social media platforms such as Orkut, civil society and academia were dominated by supposedly liberal savarnas who led this psychologically scarring campaign.

OBCs—a collection of over 3500 backward communities—are estimated to constitute almost 52 per cent of India's population. The savarna-controlled state stopped the British policy of conducting a caste census, so their precise share in the population is presently unknown. As mentioned in Chapter 1, OBCs, SCs and STs are estimated to account for upwards of 75 per cent of India's population. That is, three out of four Indians are SC, ST or OBC—this is a Bahujan nation. Had one surveyed the representation of these communities in visible civic life in 2006—in the judiciary, in the media, in elite private jobs, in luxury real estate enclaves, in share of wealth, in leadership positions in Bollywood or sports like cricket, in academia, etc.—one would have found hardly any meaningful numbers. In fact, if one were to repeat this exercise nearly eighteen years later, in 2024, the results would have remained virtually unchanged.

Without adequate demographic opportunity or participation, large parts of Indian society remained blind spots, much like they had under the earlier system. The Indian growth story, which stalled in the early 2020s, is a culmination of these processes—which excluded the people below the glass floor from becoming equal and legitimate stakeholders in development. This not only centralized power in the hands of BJP's opaque regime but also accelerated the backslide of almost all democratic institutions of accountability. This has been a two-decade-long hijacking of India's resources and planning prerogatives by a small section of savarnas, who have profited immensely at the cost of

excluding millions.

As mentioned earlier, this hijack began with the rise of educated technical labour, which was highly sought after by the market as it rushed into the sectors from which the state had retreated. It was technical education that lifted millions of non-aristocratic savarnas and made them the de facto ruling class. It was therefore inevitable that the consolidation of their gains would be the most visible in the hiving off of 'elite' education to create a 'new level' that was accessible only to themselves.

When the savarna-led anti-OBC quota movement of 2006 did not bear fruit (the Congress, with only 145 MPs, was dependent on social justice parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Left parties, and was bound to implement the policy), savarna capital mobilized to respond differently. In a democratic system, the weight of millions of votes behind caste-based social justice parties could not be offset. Thus began a low-key momentum to establish a 'strong' leader who was 'growth and market oriented'—terms that, in the savarna imagination, always meant policies that did not pertain to caste-based social justice and participation.

At the same time, efforts were made to close the gates of higher education-led technical employment and corporate opportunities to the vast millions below the glass floor. During the 1990s and 2000s, a small but significant section of SCs, STs and OBCs had, against all odds, managed to educate themselves, which placed them at the cusp of this technical market boom. In the following years, however, the scope for them to continue rising was significantly diminished by an entirely new tier of 'elite exclusivity'. As placement figures stagnated and college fees rose astronomically, a new kind of education emerged, offering super premium access to only a select few. A new kind of order, a new kind of elite born out of a new kind of student.

4

Today, in addition to the 900+ international curriculum schools, there are over 500 state private universities in India. Furthermore, there are another 130+ Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that are 'deemed-to-be universities', many of which are also private entities.

Taken together, as of early 2025, out of almost 1200 universities or 'deemed to be universities' operating in India, more than 40 per cent of all universities operating in the country are in the private sector. Yet, hardly any of them have affirmative action policies for caste inclusion in admissions or hiring. Hundreds of these institutions have been set up in just the last decade and a half, largely funded by prominent savarna capitalists—Ambani, Jindal, Premji, Mahindra, etc. In most of these universities, fees are higher than in public universities, which have been systemically vilified by savarna discourse as 'old school' and outdated in meeting contemporary market demands.

Private institutions claim to provide top-class infrastructure and generously give out 'need-based' or 'merit-based' scholarships. However, since these scholarships are linked to economic necessity or grades achieved, they deliberately overlook the constitutional mandate of reservations for students from SCs, STs and OBCs. These communities are historically disadvantaged in terms of access to higher education and are poorly represented in institutions of higher learning. The scholarship criteria of merit or financial need does little to correct the under-representation and overlooks the structural advantages that helped privileged students get high grades. Moreover, it entirely overlooks the multidimensional nature of poverty and exclusion discussed in Chapter 2.

Apart from the lack of caste and cultural diversity, the much-hyped pedagogical superiority of these institutions remains largely unproven. The combined research output of their faculty is subpar compared to leading public institutions. The syllabi and reading lists of many disciplines—such as psychology, economics and sociology—are not very different from those of public colleges. Course delivery is primarily lecture-based, with the occasional field visit, much like the colleges that these institutions claim to be improving upon. Where they do seem to differ is in the mandatory academic writing and public speaking programmes baked into the curriculum, along with experiential learning modules that require students to undertake one or more internships in the social service sector or corporate offices. These features serve as a 'finishing touch' for students already trained in effective communication during their elite English-medium schooling.

Marketing videos posted by these private universities on social media claim that their campuses have a vibrant student body, a wide range of activities and an active club culture. In truth, student governments and clubs are heavily regulated and closely monitored.

Even within university administrative structures, serious protocol violations occur due to a lack of transparency regarding member nominations and decision-making processes. Many forms of bigotry and violence, including sexual assault, often go unreported, as these institutions prioritize 'clean records' over ensuring the safety and dignity of their students. SC, ST and OBC students are particularly vulnerable in such environments, as more often than not, there is no faculty or administrative body to turn to in cases of exclusion.

This creates a schizophrenic campus reality—even for savarna students—where classroom discussions often pertain to radical themes of critical thought, emancipation, feminist and queer theory, social inclusion and empathetic pedagogy, yet the lived student experience is isolating, alienating and traumatic. Students are often subjected to very intrusive policies of surveillance, their body and baggage scanned, their clothes policed, habits scrutinized and intimacies moralized upon. Ultimately, we end up with students who can write great essays on Foucault and Gramsci while subjecting their self and mind to deep mental and physical policing.

Students also feel pressure to be servile as their campus performance is often linked to their scholarships. Under the guise of these scholarships, many institutions co-opt students into their labour force, making them undertake activities such as marketing to foreign institutions, chaperoning industry guests or conducting guided tours for parents of prospective students. These students are trained to give scripted 'spontaneous' and positive answers to questions regarding life on campus and gender safety concerns.

These institutions are sites of hyper-technocratic, market-friendly narratives, unconcerned about the gradual erosion of critical thinking on social inclusion, caste, cultural plurality and public-facing growth. The invocation of highly Sanskritized rituals—from induction to convocation—the naming of buildings after savarna icons, the installation of their statues, the celebration of problematic ideas such as the guru–shishya parampara (the teacher–disciple tradition) and the inviting of right-wing intellectuals and godmen to campuses all

point to a deliberate Brahmanization of these spaces. In a sleight of hand unique to upper-caste liberals, these measures are often sold under the guise of 'decolonization' through fanciful reinterpretations.

Ironically, it is the embrace of 'English' as not just a language but as a cultural performance that these institutions lean on as proof of their supposed excellence. International curriculum schools and the most elite private universities place great emphasis on speaking, writing and 'performing' English fluently. The focus is on public speaking, projecting confidence and dominance, while using language as a tool of cultural soft power. Discussions on dressing and grooming are not uncommon, with some institutions penalizing students for wearing 'poor-looking' clothes, even at the college level.

This weaponization of English as a powerful filter works because fluency in the language is often directly linked to intergenerational literacy and access to the 'best kind of schools' and curricula. Even schools offering the Indian curricula of ICSE or CBSE have a distinct advantage over small-town, zila parishad and rural schools offering state board curricula. Students who graduate from the latter may be able to read the English alphabet but are stunned into silence and intimidated by the fluency of so-called 'elite' students. The lack of diversity in social experiences is not something the elite schooling system tries to address; instead, it actively cocoons students from any exposure to life below the glass floor. These levels of insulation are now so extreme and so deeply entrenched that an entirely new generation of wealthy Gen Z students has appeared in elite classrooms, oblivious to material realities or social discourse beyond the vaguest and most superficial terms.

The blank-eyed nihilism and detachment in this cohort—the collective boredom and desperation to be part of something more meaningful socially and culturally—is something largely overlooked in analyses of India's savarna Gen Z. Most commentaries are either inanely celebratory or designed to make them sound exotic or rebellious without delving into the deeper, murky world of their internal contradictions.

A broken, darker and culturally isolated elite cohort of teenagers and young adults has been thrust into an unwilling zone of generational leadership at a time when the elite, exclusionary system established via the savarna consensus of the past three decades is

cracking. It is an unfair generational prerogative for these savarna teens. But at least they speak English well, so they will be able to articulate their grievances eloquently.

* * *

5

Kuch Kuch Savarna Hai: Love, Sex and Romance in a Caste Society

1

In April 2023, I wrote an article titled ‘Dating Like a Savarna’ for the online publishing platform, Swaddle.[22] It was supposed to be a critical look at the caste politics and negotiation of intimacies, romance, love and desire on dating apps in contemporary urban India. Caste, as a deeply embedded social reality, had already been written about extensively from the lens of spatial segregation in cities, eating habits and social interactions within academic and professional lives. It seemed only logical to me that the same patterns would extend into personal and intimate lives as well.

My own lived experiences of love and sex across caste boundaries had imprinted on my psyche codes of shame, doubt, guilt, anger, discomfort and confusion with respect to the women (and men) who had walked in and out my life, publicly (and privately). In hindsight, my article did not break new ground. It merely drew a basic connection between caste-cultural capital and aesthetics as the basis of dating app swiping preferences. I peppered the piece with anecdotes, incidents and insights from the lived reality of marginalized caste persons around me. Similar stories unfold daily in the lives of SC, ST and OBC persons who have ventured into the savarna world of love and desire. This was basic stuff—the kind of online op-ed that is shared for a few days and then forgotten.

However, the backlash that followed was unlike anything I had expected. On Twitter, hordes of mostly anonymous (but as indicated by their bios, handles and profile pictures) savarna men showered vile abuses at me. The piece was also framed by some as an attempt to

guilt savarna women into having sexual relations with non-savarna men. It was critiqued and slammed, torn apart line by line, argument by argument, in derisive and dismissive ways.

Almost a year later, when Manisha Mondal, an SC woman, wrote a piece on a similar theme pertaining to caste and dating apps, all hell broke loose again.[23] She observed that upon learning her caste, savarna men would either immediately end the conversation or attack caste-based affirmative action. This straightforward point invited the most vile body-shaming and slut-shaming comments upon her, which were also deeply caste-coded to maximize humiliation. Earlier, when anti-caste scholars like Christina Dhanaraj had written on such themes, a sense of disbelief and dismissal was expressed loudly and publicly.[24] It seems that much of the discourse that critically examines how desire and sex play out in the context of caste—especially in urban and affluent savarna circles—incurs shrill reactions and summary dismissals. It triggers something primal.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar underlines intermarriage between castes as an essential component in bringing about the fall of caste-based social segregation. However, more than the ritual of marriage itself, he emphasizes that the religious notions of caste would also need to fall. He suggests that merely 'occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages is a futile method', and that the real solution lay in destroying the 'belief in the sanctity of the shastras'. In other words, the notions of maintaining social and sexual segregation were key to maintaining caste hierarchies.

In an era where the technical workforce was uprooted from their home towns and villages and aggregated in a few select, overpopulated metropolitan centres, non-marital intimacies across caste became possible in ways that were unthinkable even twenty years prior. Large, constantly churning office teams, alienated and lonely social lives, the ubiquity of dating apps and the neoliberal commodification of sexual liberty and consumerist choice all created space for a cohort of professional elites to form relationships that would never have taken place organically.

In a stratified, hierarchical society, such developments could have dealt a significant blow to the body politic of caste. The urban elite working professionals of the late 1990s and early 2000s could

(theoretically) have been the first wave in dismantling caste feudalism. Instead, caste mutated, finding new ways to make the separation more insidious and innate.

Many elite savarnas often declare that they don't 'see' caste in people. In fact, they don't even know their own caste or *gotra* properly. Yet, they have very specific ways of determining the 'level' of a person they can be attracted to, mingle with, sleep with, marry and raise children with. Contrary to their superficial claims, these decisions are not based solely on looks, wealth and personality. Even if they were, in a society where cultural capital is linked to caste, how far can wealth, career and personality be seen independent of it?

It is such lines of questioning that make elite savarnas very uncomfortable. In their own self-concocted mythology, the educated, English-speaking, urban elites are fond of seeing themselves as rational and balanced individuals, with some liberal leanings but never straying too far from 'traditional' virtues. However, any critical interrogation of the politics of desire and power in sexually intimate couples across caste lines tends to shatter this savarna self-perception. For in the realm of sexual desire and performance, bodies and boundaries are bare naked. There is little to hide behind. Notions of purity and pollution, kink and fantasy, debasing and degrading, power and pull all lie exposed as internalized caste conditioning that often spills out in raw and unfiltered ways. It is these moments that elite savarna society instinctively seeks to repress, for they reveal how deeply gender and sexuality are linked to their anthropological training. And it is not a pretty revelation.

Therefore, any attempt to interrogate or underline these dynamics—especially by a caste-marginalized voice from below the glass floor—triggers cultural panic. That is why they explode, dismiss, disbelieve, abuse and shout down any such intervention as it cuts too close to the bone of their own self-perception. Without their self-aggrandizing myth of being sensible, logical, clear-sighted, articulate and critical individuals—a myth that elite savarnas of the post-1990s boom era have accepted as their identity—they have nothing to separate themselves from their more openly conservative, feudally placed and less nuance-performing cousins.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that this is the domain that invites the most thunderous eruption of pent-up rage and backlash from elite

savarnas. From the most foul abuses to the snarkiest takedowns, from open threats to vaguely dismissive tutting—it covers the spectrum. And if you are an assertive Ambedkarite, you are never forgiven.

Within days of my article being published, my employer's patience ran out. Working in a savarna-dominated private university had always been a difficult negotiation, but the scale of the online hue and cry, combined with the 'topic' I had written about, sealed my fate. I was obliged to resign and move on.

Still, I count myself lucky. In a society where love across caste lines easily leads to social boycott and caste-based 'honour killings', where even talking of such things can be seen as 'disrespect', unleashing police FIRs and angry gangs ready for vigilante justice, losing a job and subsequently being 'soft' blacklisted in the academic market is not bad when compared to the alternatives.

2

The proliferation of engineering and management schools (as a result of the processes discussed in the previous chapter) created greater mobility for educated youth beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Savarna parents began to warm up to the idea of sending their children, especially daughters, to other cities for higher education, as this was increasingly seen as the key to landing high-paying technical jobs in the newly emerging, narrowurban boom.

However, along with this migration came the anxiety of being unable to supervise their teenage children and young adults. The safety of young women studying on campuses far from their home towns was an obvious and urgent concern. However, as Indian feminists—including savarna women themselves—have long pointed out, under the guise of creating safe spaces for women, regimes of moral policing were set up instead. At the heart of this was the caste anxiety of savarna women mingling with undesirable bodies. This was not a new development brought about by the economic policies of the 1990s. Scholars have previously examined how the evolution of 'middle class-nesss' in the savarna public sphere during the colonial era was itself built on a fractured 'modernity' that stitched together the philosophies of John Stuart Mill and Manu.[25] The latter, the mythical author of the *Manusmriti*, imposed strict rules of control and

degradation on women's agency. While Manu and his 'smriti' have been directly challenged by savarna feminists in recent decades, his laws remain central to the social order.[26]

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, in 'Castes in India', argued that Manu could not have 'given' the laws of caste. He was, at best, a codifier of a system that existed long before him—one so absurd, exclusionary and tyrannical that it could not have been the will or diktat of a single man. Rather, it could only have persisted through social consensus—a collective agreement among savarnas, led by Brahmans, which Babasaheb described as 'a disembodied spirit' that is invoked and appealed to, and one that he said 'will yet live long'.

One reason for the long life of this ghost of Manu is its periodic reinvention in every era. From colonial 'modernity' to the era of Instagram influencers, it is the social consensus of caste that holds together Brahmanism and the savarna social order. The migration of youth to college campuses across the country and workplaces in Mumbai, Delhi–Gurgaon–Noida, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and elsewhere was not going to change it. Instead, both the youth and the systems around them adapted to accommodate the 'spirit of Manu' by mutual consensus.

This consensus must be understood in critical caste terms. While savarna women can—and now frequently do—loudly critique the *Manusmriti* and its derogatory prescriptions for women and marginalized castes, many, in their personal and professional conduct, have participated, co-opted and even created spaces that align closely with the diktats of Manu. While the direct language of the *Manusmriti* is too crude and explicit to be accepted literally, its manifestations and mutations through clever nuance form the bulwark of savarna society in contemporary modernity.

From housing societies to workspaces, rituals at events like inaugurations, felicitations and the like are often organized and initiated by savarna women. Their pride and joy in maintaining havans and pujas is deeply manifest, and their exuberance is loudly communicated. Even in daily anthropology, the collective consensus among savarna women in performing and enforcing separation and exclusion is widely known and understood, yet not critiqued or reformed in any meaningful structural sense. For instance, many of my friends—Brahman and Bania women—have privately shared how they

were stopped from accessing the kitchen, prayer rooms or other spaces during their periods. They expressed anguish and humiliation at such practices. Yet, these practices are tolerated because they are seen as separate from other rituals—such as fasts, festivals and prayers—that are part of the same cosmology. The latter are often enthusiastically celebrated, while the former humiliations are lamented and explained as negotiations with traditions imposed by older, inflexible relatives.

This same kind of logic is echoed by savarna men when confronted with the dualities of their own social lives. At least savarna women have begun to outline and flag these contradictions; most savarna men have had no such discursive reflection on their collective lives. They live within this 'Manu-modernity' brazenly and shamelessly. From the nouveau riche men of erstwhile peasant Shudra castes to the progressive-politics-espousing, intergenerationally literate and wealthy Brahman men, and every other kind of savarna in between, the ability of savarna men to keep one foot in progressive modernity while claiming caste-ordained entitlements with the other has yet to be documented in its true glory. Even the most progressive, educated and politically 'woke' savarna men often seamlessly slip into conservatism in the name of appeasing family elders, preserving the family name or maintaining the social order—while claiming that they personally do not endorse such actions.

This adjustment is widely understood within savarna society as inevitable. After all, who has the power to confront the old guard? And even if they could, would it not be more humane to indulge their ways in the autumn of their lives? Both savarna women and savarna men are in near total alignment on these matters. This is more transparently obvious among the elite savarnas who came into their own during the 1990s and 2000s. Many of them began as rebellious youths, virtuously aligning themselves with radical global movements against patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism, or comfort-consuming from the assembly lines of the US cultural industry. Yet, the savarna millennials always made space for the 'spirit of Manu'. That ghost was always made comfortable even as it sat alongside endless reruns of *Friends* and *The Office*, posters of Che Guevara, 'eat the rich' memes, Tumblr-fuelled queerdom discoveries and listening to Pink Floyd while smoking up.

There was never too much deviation from 'Manu'. Even in the free-

market era of education, workforce mobility, disposable income and the internet, savarnas mostly chose each other for caste-aligned couplings. This self-selection of culturally and aesthetically similar, caste-compatible partners must also be seen as a form of labour politics among elite savarnas. It is a caste training that ranks all labour hierarchically and prevents them from recognizing the dignity (or even basic humanity) in labours considered 'below' their 'level'. Caste is ultimately a social system of 'ordering' levels and maintaining strict separation among the levels.

Such a maintenance of 'levels' in terms of labour categories was already embedded in the caste-sanitized environment of technical institutions like engineering and management colleges. By the mid-2000s, the explosion of such colleges, most of which were in the private sector, provided ample scope for love, romance, sex and heartbreak—all within caste boundaries that were already pre-filtered—ergo no 'mingling' with bodies from 'lower tier' colleges. Rankings created levels of elite ordering which were reproduced in workforce separation in levels (often within) the same organizations, so much so that even fellow savarna professionals from 'lower ranked' institutions also found themselves judged and sidelined.

However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, many non-savarnas still managed to leak into some of these elite college and workspaces. As the barriers to entry could not entirely exclude such unwanted bodies, more nuanced forms of filtering were needed to determine the dynamics of courtship and romance on such campuses and beyond.

Wealth is, of course, the first filter. The fees and cost of living for such programmes are beyond the means of those below the glass floor, and without the brand of an elite programme, high-paying and high-tier jobs are also out of reach. Even gaining admission requires expensive coaching interventions. For instance, preparing for CAT, which determines eligibility for an MBA programme, can cost Rs 50,000 or more for a year-long preparatory package. In addition to the fees, a family must be able to provide the student with the means to prepare adequately. This can include any number of factors, from not burdening them with the pressure to earn and contribute financially to the family, to simply ensuring they have a room to study in, equipped with a fan and power backup. While these may appear trivial to many savarnas, they are financially out of reach for a vast majority. As a

result, most of the non-savarnas who reach these elite circles are from wealthier or more privileged backgrounds within their communities. Yet, once inside, they quickly realize that their relative riches are nothing compared to the accumulated wealth of generations. They are faced with the hard fact that the availability of disposable income is an important dimension of 'coolness'.

When I was in college in the mid-2000s, branded T-shirts and hoodies immediately set the 'rich kids' apart as the cool ones. In the decades since, fashion sophistication has intensified exponentially, hovering now on cosplay-level costumes and thematic 'fits' that match every sub-genre of quirk. Yet, the association between wealth and coolness has arguably remained the same. I am not suggesting a simple, linear binary where all rich savarna kids are 'cool' and all poorer students are non-savarna. God forbid I do such a thing and trigger the savarna 'struggle story' reflex, where many would be itching to narrate how they weren't wealthy in college as proof of 'not all savarnas'. But hold on.

Because of this strong correlation, there has been a counter response where curating a more grunge, nihilistic savarna persona is now marked as 'cooler'. While appearing to be a rejection of wealth-based coolness, such personas are actually an even more privileged form of cultural archetyping. They rely heavily on drug-hippie, anarchist tropes sourced from niche social media subcultures—a 'vibe' or practice that only someone immersed in deep cultural mining would understand well. As particularly landed Shudra elites began accruing enough wealth to match the 'clothes and cars' aesthetics of sophisticated savarnas, the 'woke/anti-capitalist' savarna trope has become 'cooler' in the last decade or so.

A non-savarna attempting to navigate such sophisticated cultural performances is almost immediately faced with a vast aesthetic disconnect. Hence, this, more than wealth, becomes the most critical filter when it comes to maintaining 'levels'.

In the era of elite savarna professionals, aesthetics play a crucial role in establishing caste boundaries. Superficially, it appears to be a personal endeavour, driven by individualistic instincts and tastes. Yet, a closer cultural examination reveals carefully curated 'aesthetic clusters', which are adopted and performed as privilege signalling displays. These clusters can range from 'looks and fits' to ideological

posturing, even down to deliberately inculcated 'idiosyncratic' habits and quirks.

During my school days, a Bengali Brahman boy that I used to be a lackey for in my quest to hack into savarna culture, helpfully (and earnestly, I think) told me, 'You need an education,' and handed me an audio cassette of Guns N' Roses. It was an English album, but unlike the music of Bryan Adams and the Backstreet Boys, it did not play on MTV. So, it was deemed not 'mainstream' and listening to it made you cooler than the normies who were still watching MTV. I was given the same logic when someone later lent me a cassette of *Beatles for Sale*. 'It will change your life,' I was told. I listened to it endlessly for two straight days, waiting for my life to transform. When I returned the album, they asked, 'So, which song was your favourite?' Innocently, I replied, '"Kansas City/Hey Hey Hey".' I will never forget their expression. They looked aghast and so disappointed in my incorrigible awkward bumpkinness. I laugh about it now, but at the time, I knew I had failed. 'Guess you will never learn,' they dismissed me.

That day, I learnt that it was not enough to simply listen to The Beatles and like them. You had to know *how* to like them. You had to hear an album and say, '"I'll Follow the Sun" changed my life.' I now understand that 'Kansas City/Hey Hey Hey' could also work, but only if you performed that differently. You had to play it cool, saying something like, 'It's an overlooked gem,' signalling a subtle mastery of what the 'mainstream' was.

So how does one figure out which song and which performance to pick? That is the aesthetic cluster performance that you can only observe from below the glass floor, never fully decode or actively participate in.

In truth, whether it was The Beatles or biking or baking or whatever elite savarnas were busy making their entire personality, each could be traced back to some form of social awareness and refinement—all originating from a variation of West-facing, intergenerational alignment, exposure and the privilege of education and wealth. It's what old-timers used to call 'polish' in everyday parlance—you were either born with it or you weren't. A privileged aesthetic culture by any name would smell just as clichéd. Shakespeare and Manu would both approve.

3

In 1952, Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, a seminal work in the psychoanalysis of the 'colonized mind'.[27] Fanon was from the tiny island of Martinique, then a French colony. The islanders were black, the colonizers were white. The latter represented enormous military and administrative power over Martinique, but it was not just that. Fanon correctly understood colonialism as not just a political or military structure but also as a psychologically colonizing process. The 'whiteness' of the French masters was not just the colour of their skin; it was a privilege that extended to language and imagination, the very vocabulary of which was embedded in a supposed European (not just French) civilizational superiority—or so it would seem to the black subjects. *Whiteness* was the very opposite of being black. Fanon described how, for the colonized mind, blackness was akin to a stain, which it sought to erase or transcend by aspiring to 'whiteness'.

Fanon's work, along with that of others from the period, notably the charismatic Malcolm X, drew attention to the racialized imaginary and unpacked how racial 'self-hate' was epistemically seeded by colonial social structures, language and cultural norms. It spoke to the fact that the more a black person transcended their 'blackness', the more successful they felt, and the transcendence was always understood as becoming everything that was not 'black', in other words, becoming 'white'.

How could a black person become white? The colour of their skin obviously could not change, but everything else could. They could learn, speak, dress and groom like a white person. They could enjoy the same aesthetics, adopt the same cultures and lifestyles—so much so that they themselves would look down upon other black persons who were still 'stuck' in their blackness.[28]

For much of post-colonial Indian history, the mechanisms of mental colonial servitude that Fanon described have been neatly replicated as cultural anxieties among Brahman and other savarna social circles. There has been a great emphasis on 'not embarrassing ourselves' in front of white people. This anxiety has manifested in everything from public policy to popular culture, where there exists a deep desire to be accepted by the whites as 'equals'.

A semiotic analysis of texts ranging from elite fashion trends of the 1970s to contemporary Gen Z Instagram reels would reveal a clear mimesis of (and, dare one say, obsession with) white cultural trends. In more recent times, as a conservative Brahman faction within the savarna fold has ascended to political power, there has been rhetoric about denouncing white cultural markers and 'decolonizing' by returning to traditional ways. However, this 'trad' lifestyle is always operationalized as a return to Brahman traditions and ways of life (real or idealized). Even this, however, has largely been lip service and a way for conservative, Brahman-aligned factions to discredit the 'liberal' savarnas who are more openly in sync with white culture.

In truth, both factions harbour a deep desire for white approval. One of the strongest empirical indicators of this is the steady exodus of Brahman and aligned savarnas—across the political spectrum—from India to white-majority Western nations. This mass migration in lakhs every year has been ongoing for the last decade and half in particular and is only intensifying. The pipeline for this movement is the parallel education system that savarnas have set up during this period, which has been discussed in the previous chapter. The implications of this exodus and its unfolding consequences will be explored later (Chapter 8). For now, the key point is that while there is a deep aspiration for 'whiteness' within savarna culture, its implications within India's stratified society are interesting.

In the racialized context that Fanon was writing in, how could one unpack sexual intimacy in encounters with the 'whites' in the face of such epistemic colonization and internalized self-hate? Fanon helpfully dedicated two entire chapters to 'the woman of colour and the white man' and 'the man of colour and the white woman'.

Hampered by my own intellectual limitations and deeply indebted to his work, I have attempted (albeit in a truncated fashion) to unpack similar questions in the context of our contemporary caste society. Borrowing from his great work, I have made one change (and some may argue it is massive enough to overturn Fanon's approach, but I think he would have approved). Instead of attempting an unpacking of the colonized mind, I am more interested in the psychosis of the colonizer's mind—in this case, the savarna mind, the Brahmanical mind.

The savarna man and the non-savarna woman

Historically, Brahmanism has not only allowed but structurally accounted for sexual relations between the dwij-savarna man and the woman from 'below'. Such couplings, labelled '*anuloma*' in the *Manusmriti*, were tolerated within the schema of Brahmanism.[29] The bodies of caste-marginalized women have long been considered 'property' that is accessible to savarna men.

This intersectional marginality is a particular flashpoint within the Indian feminist movement. Old-school savarna feminists such as Kamala Bhasin insist that for women, 'honour doesn't lie in our vagina'. Activist-scholar Riya Singh, from an SC background and with a deeper understanding of these intersectionalities, challenged this perspective, insisting, 'Our (Dalit women's) honour does lie in the vagina because the vagina is the place that gets violated and mutilated in all the caste rapes in this country.[30] If honour doesn't lie in the vagina then why so much focus on mutilating ours in such hideous and violent manners? What is the message that savarnas want to give by mutilating our vaginas?'

She was referring to the gruesome sexual violence that is commonplace in 'caste rapes', which occur with a fanatic frequency across the country. These incidents only sporadically make it to the mainstream (savarna) news—such as in the brutal caste atrocities at Khairlanji or Hathras. The vast majority of caste-based rapes receive little media attention, and many do not even get reported, as the police is unwilling to file cases against caste-dominant men.

In most cases, caste rapes serve as a 'message' to the entire community to stay in line and not assert or transgress. The sheer scale of violent barbarism in the name of caste, still commonplace (yet glossed over or hidden) within India (and larger south Asia), deserves solemn museums and monuments of reflection and sorrow cataloguing the horrors that far exceed the scope of a single book. At the centre of this caste violence are the bodies of marginalized caste women.

Younger savarna feminists may have started pivoting towards this intersectionality, and most will now include caste as integral to their structural understanding of gendered violence and vulnerability. Yet, SC, ST and OBC feminists remain a minority within the gender studies discourse and often at the margins of institutional academia and

publishing. The mechanics of this exclusion are best discussed by women from marginalized caste backgrounds, as they can do so with a nuance that my mediocrity cannot hope to match.

The point germane to this chapter—and the one I return to—is that sexual access to the bodies of marginalized caste women, or rather, the assured impunity with which savarna men claim it, has a basis in both historical Brahmanism and contemporary patterns of gendered violence, and everything connecting the two.

In the collective masculinity of various savarna cultures, the very claim to 'upper casteness' is a masculine assertion—an assertion of the power to access, debase, dehumanize and mutilate the bodies of non-savarna women. Even the few Shudra communities that acquired land and rose in power in the twentieth century, but continue to be culturally gatekept and minimized by Brahmanical hegemony, will nonetheless exercise this power (frequently) over SC, ST and other 'lower' OBC women.

Among the posher savarna masculinities—the urban elites we have spent much time scrutinizing in this book—this mentality of entitlement over the bodies of marginalized caste women remains just as endemic. It is simply cloaked in neat layers of performance rather than crudely enacted.

Over the last two and a half decades, educated savarna men have taken cues from white Western modernity, adopting a performative softness and vocalizing feminist politics, moulding these into a form of seduction itself. The shallowness of this performance, and its contradictions, have of course been exposed by savarna women themselves. Through writings, memes and humour, they have successfully outlined the trope of the 'feminist-appearing', well-spoken savarna man who is often creepy and/or violent in his personal conduct. Much of this original critique again comes from white Western cultural commentary, but savarna women have added enough local context to make it translate effectively in India. That particular brand of performative progressiveness as masculine seduction now stands widely exposed and neutered. However, for our discourse, it is important to reflect on who it was seducing to begin with.

Women from marginalized caste backgrounds, even in the rare instances where they manage to rise above the glass floor, often find that the savarna male progressive seduction tends to play out a little

differently. The entitlement and arrogance of savarna men—especially in interactions with non-savarna women—rarely extend to even the semblance of seduction. Even the most progressive, feminist or leftist-leaning savarna men tend to become fragile in the face of the slightest rejection by caste-marginalized women—a point hinted at in the aforementioned article by Manisha Mondol. Her education, articulation, talent or competence becomes secondary. Rejection or ridicule from any woman is already difficult for such masculine performances to handle, but when it comes from a non-savarna woman, it becomes unbearable. The entitlement to debase and defile such assertions is embedded in savarna masculine training, and despite the polish and sophistication, it flares up rapidly in such circumstances. For many of them, the bodies of non-savarna women are not sites of dialogue but of domination.

Larger debates around colourism, body shapes and sexual promiscuity—markers of the idealized 'feminine' in the masculine cultural imagination—are actually discourses of caste, weaponized by men against non-savarna women's body and character. While caste itself is not a racialized identity, the 'ideal type' of woman—fair-skinned, slim and chaste—is reflexively understood as the 'upper casteness' of the woman. So while debates on colourism and body positivity may not explicitly be understood as caste-coded, in Indian society, they are intrinsically shaped against the non-savarna woman—even if she herself is fair-skinned or slim and fits a more 'idealized upper caste' understanding of beauty.

Savarna humour in its cruder form makes direct references to this. The recent widespread use of terms like '*chapri*', especially when mocking girls, directly references these non-savarna markers of womanhood. A 'chapri' girl is a dark-skinned, badly dressed woman with a poor 'aesthetic'. Moreover, she is unaware of her 'place' and thus becomes an object of mockery and shaming. In a Fanonian sense, 'chapriness' or the 'non-savarna' self cannot be a site of desire. To be desired, that 'chapriness' must be transcended.

In the rare instances when savarna men couple with non-savarna women for long-term partnerships, the impulse is to erase the innate 'non-savarna-ness' of the partner. In a patriarchal and caste-stratified environment, the non-savarna woman is already at a deep disadvantage. The savarna man's cultural system and existence are

validated by the cultural power of his kin—it echoes in films, TV shows, on the streets, in offices, in humour, on the internet, everywhere and always in the dominant mainstream discourse. The non-savarna woman's way of life and being, deeply rooted in her own community, becomes less visible the more she moves away from it in order to succeed above the glass floor. The more she is considered desirable, the more she loses bits of herself to the relentless onslaught of savarna culture—until its inexorable cultural erosion grates at her soul, and the friction she feels in her bones flares up in disagreements and fights.

And so, either the fabric of the relationship breaks down, or she surrenders, allowing her identity to be consumed.

My mother, an SC woman, married an OBC man. It was a pairing that was opposed by both families. It was not based on love (as both my parents maintain), but rather built upon heavy undertones of sexual tension, lust and some romantic idealism (as made clear from all narratives). It was not an era for casual dating and fuckery, so they tried to elope and were forced to marry.

After moving to his house, she had to give up the meat she loved. She was asked to stop reading newspapers around the other men in the house, who took her reading as an affront. She was immediately tasked with household chores and her movements were restricted. Her religion was taken from her. Even her very name was changed via an affidavit. Yet, to this day, my father's endless lament is that she has been disrespectful to him by never truly accepting him as the 'man' of the house. No surrender is enough unless the very confidence of the 'lower' caste woman is completely shattered, and she accepts her place as an anuloma entity—a secondary unit. Even then, in a frequent pattern, many savarna men who hook up with or date caste-marginalized women end up walking away from marriage or long-term commitment, citing 'caste-incompatibility'.

None of this is to say that such relationships or intimacies are an impossibility. There are couples dating, fucking, living together and even happily married, who have found some semblance of balance and peace within themselves and against the grain of a caste-stratified society. However, such feats require tremendous deftness and sensitivity to navigate—something very few savarna men are willing to learn or develop the patience for.

The savarna woman and the non-savarna man

Not too long ago, a friend of mine asked me, almost provokingly, 'You only date savarna women, don't you?' She was a professional from a non-savarna community. Her question gave me pause. It was true that many of my visible relationships had been with savarna women. But I found myself dwelling less on the fact that I had (publicly) dated so many of them and more on why those relationships hadn't worked out. It was a very personal journey of exploration—one that pushed me to examine the intangible inheritances of caste, both theirs and mine. It also made me question my own attraction, or rather the nature of it, at least in my youth.

As mentioned earlier, some sections of educated, elite savarna women—especially in the last decade—have acknowledged and tried to centre the intersectional precarity of caste-marginalized women. However, they are not very open to extending this understanding of the graded and contextual privileges with respect to non-savarna men. Part of this is because their gaze is largely limited to the few caste-marginalized men who have manged to rise above the glass floor—and even those lives are not truly understood by them.

Below the glass floor, masculinity takes on a vastly different and contested form for men from non-savarna communities. News stories of SC men being killed for sporting a moustache, riding a horse, dressing well or listening to *Bhim geet* are not isolated incidents.[31] They are merely the tip of the iceberg, which comprises a vast and entrenched system of violence, both direct and indirect, inflicted upon caste-marginalized men. From physical beatings and humiliations such as forced tonsuring and face-blackening, being stripped naked to threats of the same, to aggressive slurs and casteist humour, caste-marginalized men inhabit a sunken place where their masculinity is always under siege by savarna men.

Apart from direct violence, savarna men also loudly flex their impunity of 'sexual access' and the debasement of non-savarna women as a means of emasculating their men. For SC, ST and 'lower' OBC men living below the glass floor, this menace and anxiety is a daily reality.

The opposite possibility—non-savarna men desiring savarna women—is a recipe for social explosion. Even the mildest insinuation of

‘disrespecting’ savarna women is avenged tenfold by savarna men, often upon the bodies of non-savarna women but also sometimes by sexually humiliating the non-savarna men themselves.

This is not to suggest that non-savarna men are incapable of committing sexual violence. Far from it. The point of untouchability in a caste society is to create so many layers of separation and segregation of spaces that, forget anything sexual, the caste-marginalized man should not even be able to exchange a simple handshake or look directly into the eyes of a privileged caste woman. At least, that is what Manu had ordained. In a society like ours, such absolute separation is impossible in practice. Savarna women can and do intersect with non-savarna men. However, in spirit, every social structure—even in elite urban India, with its gated communities and aesthetic filtered social lives—is designed to maximize this separation as far as possible.

It is true that the shackles of Brahmanical society are particularly harsh on Brahman and savarna women. However, the endurance of caste untouchability and segregation, its perpetuation into modernity and the self-selection of caste-appropriate savarna pairings in the era of IT and AI would not be possible without some degree of tacit cooperation from (at least some of) the savarna women themselves.

In the context of the US—whose popular culture savarnas love styling from to set themselves ‘apart and above’—black humour has often identified and critiqued aspects of white culture in ways that a hundred books cannot meaningfully unpack. One such example is the character archetype of ‘Karen’, a staple of many memes that has now entered popular vocabulary. It serves as a reference for white women who weaponize their ‘white femininity’—through entitlement or fragility—to bring trouble upon someone otherwise marginalized (usually black). Such sharp archetyping highlights the complicit role of white women in maintaining the racial divide in US society. No similar or equivalent archetype exists for savarna women in the context of a caste society.

It would have been useful for some such archetypes to exist to map how a lot of savarna women have mastered a difficult doublespeak that even the smoothest savarna male performers/seducers cannot hope to achieve. In the characteristic savarna habit of mythologizing their own struggles, such a savarna woman casts herself as the

protagonist in a difficult journey towards independence, agency and assertion, fighting against family opposition and the Brahmanical patriarchy. She speaks of this struggle without often accounting for the privileges, social networks and discounted labour that the same social structures have brought her. Additionally, she has also learnt the polite-speak of acknowledging other, more marginalized women, talking about 'learning/unlearning' from them and 'not taking up too much space'.

However, in the company of SC and ST women, I have come to understood how frequently these commentaries are insincere, self-serving and ultimately, a performance. Where the savarna man has a performance of seduction—for his is a quest of Manu-ordained domination—the savarna woman, especially in contemporary modernity, is a performance of 'transcendence'. She wants to transcend savarna society and even the savarna man by curating herself above those around by casting herself as most 'interesting' and empathetic person—a perfect riposte to the arrogance and entitled swagger of the savarna man.

Very few can make the difficult journey of moving beyond their self-image and see their indignation at being scrutinized as a savarna as a manifestation of explosive caste rage. It is an exhausting journey because, to even attempt it, they must dismantle their own compelling self-story of their 'transcendence'.

But what about non-savarna men? How does one make sense of their presence, their pandering and their attraction towards savarna women?

'All these marginalized men just weaponize their marginality, last *mei sabko sex hi chahiye na* (in the end everyone just wants sex, right)?' A savarna woman said this at a party where my friend, a caste-marginalized woman, was also present. The guests were all social workers, academics, journalists, etc. The comment came in the middle of a long discussion on marginality, caste and social pressures —the kind that happens often at such gatherings after a few drinks.

My friend told me she froze when she heard this because she immediately pictured the men she had grown up around. In that generalization, their precarity, their lives under the glass floor seemed so far away. I have already made the point that when savarnas, men

and women, theorize about non-savarna folks, often their gaze is very limited, and in matters of personal intimacy, it is usually confined to the few non-savarna individuals they happen to cross paths with. I return to this remark by the savarna woman (and to my non-savarna friend's earlier question about my dating choices) because it was very interesting for me to consider that sexual intimacy with savarna women may itself be a conscious or subliminal 'prize' that non-savarna men seek.

At least both savarna and non-savarna women seem to hint at the same thing. Of course, I am not generalizing based on isolated quotes, but such quotes are helpful in narrativizing context—a context that in this case is rarely admitted. I know from experience that non-savarna men (including myself, on occasion) have chafed at such suggestions. What is so obvious to women, both savarna and non-savarna, about this? And why does it make non-savarna men uncomfortable? Is the non-savarna man also performing a seduction (and failing at it so transparently)?

I reflect on my own dating past because, for sure, I am not, as I write these words, sitting antiseptically removed and detached. I am writing with the passion and precision that comes from being in the heart of the furnace. And when you are in the furnace, you burn too. So I look at my own charred self, think and investigate. Do I curate my identity for sex? Maybe I do. Who doesn't?

I go back to Fanon. He writes about black boys sailing to France, and how the first thing they would do upon disembarking was to find a brothel and sleep with a white woman—to claim a white body, possess it sexually and hope that in doing so, they could wash off their innate 'blackness', something they had internalized as dark, primitive and backward. I have never been interested in prostitutes except in the stories of Manto, Kundera or Bukowski. All vile men in some sense, but I have always been more interested in vile men. Savarna women, not so much. Such is my predilection.

However, I remember vividly when I truly encountered elite savarna women for the first time. It was when I walked into Jadavpur University campus in Calcutta. I was seventeen. I had tried to run away from home twice that year because I was convinced I would fail my class twelve board exams. As it turned out, I barely passed. Convinced of my academic mediocrity, my parents were set on putting

me in a shoddy college where attendance did not matter. I was to use my day instead to be an apprentice in a 'dhanda' somewhere or help with my father's 'factory'.

I spent that summer as a lackey to the aforementioned Brahman boy—who, I think, kept me around for giggles, through casual bullying and insults. I didn't mind. His world felt so much bigger. It had The Beatles and books by Bernard Shaw. His father was a university professor.

One afternoon, I tagged along with him, and we entered the Jadavpur University campus. The image is imprinted on my mind, as clear as day: young women my age wearing sleeveless T-shirts, smoking cigarettes and playing cards with the boys. In that moment, I decided I wanted to study there. My parents were beside themselves. It meant I could not financially support the family because I wanted to do 'real college', studying political science—because that was all I could get admitted to. Frankly, I would have taken even Sanskrit at that point. They saw no value in it and never understood why I was suddenly so committed to this idea. I, of course, could not tell them about the women who were smoking.

I go back to this moment often. There was no particular woman I was looking at or attracted to. It was the vague promise of a certain kind of confident, assertive woman that I found alluring. The savarna cultural machinery had taught us that an independent woman was one who fit the image I saw on that campus. The quiet resolve, the overcoming of great odds and the fierce independence of our caste-marginalized women had always been framed as meekness, subservience and undesirable. It has been a great aesthetic disservice to caste-marginalized women whose entire journey of ascendance is framed as 'timid introvertness' in comparison to the transcendence narrative of the savarna woman.

Above all, this aesthetic discourse taught me, taught us that our entire lives, our ways of being and situatedness (as I mentioned in Chapter 1, my world was Topsia and Tangra and my immediate neighbourhood was gullies and slums), were things to be escaped from. A condition that needed to be scrubbed off. And truly, all I ever wanted at that stage of my life was to escape the gravitational orbit of the milieu my life was circulating around. That image, that sense of possibility, was what I found so attractive. It was everything my life

was not. It was not a ‘stain’.

For many non-savarna men, whose collective masculinity is under structural siege, the notion of dating or being involved with a Brahman or savarna woman can (consciously or subconsciously) indeed feel like a congratulatory moment or a coming of age. But these pairings are rare, happening usually on college campuses or in corporate workforces, because in any other context, it is simply too loaded to play out with any semblance of normalcy. That is also where I dated most of the savarna women I have in my life.

Looking back, it is clear to me that young Ravikant had a type. The girls with short hair and difficult personalities, who smoked, who had eccentric habits, drank with the boys, talked about sex and politics, had tattoos and skull pendants, and independent dreams that were not limited to getting married and having kids, girls who were crazy and not ‘cautious’. They represented everything my life was not. They represented a world I could enter—one that was otherwise impossible to reach from where I came. A final testament of ascendance.

Mapping such a personal ascendance of non-savarna men through the desire for a certain archetype of savarna woman is of course glaringly transparent to non-savarna women. Dalit and Bahujan feminists have long slammed caste-marginalized men for their ‘fetish’ for savarna women (much like how black women have critiqued black men for fetishizing lighter-skinned or white women). Many among them will notice (and laugh at) how radical-activist non-savarna men appear soft and agreeable around the educated, well-dressed, well-groomed savarna woman—who inverts the savarna male performance of saviourism or revolutionism by becoming the ‘radical ally’, eager to learn, to be saved and to save.

What does such a pairing mean or bring for the savarna woman? I do not mean to sound like an apologist for non-savarna men. We are just as talented at being parochial, insecure, paranoid, possessive and violent as any other men. I simply mean to draw attention to the dimensions of graded privilege within a caste society, which shape the dynamics of a savarna woman–non-savarna man pairing. With graded privilege also come graded insecurities, especially in a social context where, as previously mentioned, non-savarna masculinities are constantly under siege. Within the context of a relationship, the non-savarna man tries to hold on to his sense of self and identity and

integrate the savarna woman into his community life, his world, his thoughts and his gaze—using the vestiges of whatever diluted patriarchal authority he can muster within the limits that caste society allows him.

In the context of the savarna woman's graded privilege, this is often an unacceptable proposition as it interferes with her notion of independence, agency and transcendence. She did not rebel against her own Brahmanical bindings to (as she consciously or unconsciously sees) be tied down to a different order. She is her own protagonist, on her own journey. It is an epistemic incompatibility—like trying to grow a plant on stone. It may happen in some bizarre circumstances, and it may be beautiful. But eventually, the plant dies, or the stone breaks.

I have already made a point about savarna men smoothly moving on from relationships with non-savarna women after breaking their sense of self. When relationships between savarna women and non-savarna men peter out they tend to follow a different path. For the men, the collapse of such a relationship marks the descent back into the world they were trying to escape. It becomes proof of their own failure. Available masculine tropes—stoicism, repression, grief and (alcoholic) self-destruction—lend modes of coping because there is not much scope for emotional expression in non-savarna lives.

For the savarna woman, however, this entanglement and its decay may mark another milestone in her journey of transcendence. I have savarna friends who, even a decade later, still talk about having once had a boyfriend who was a 'Dalit' or 'Muslim' or 'Tribal', reducing the relationship and the person to almost a memento—proof of her progressiveness and open-mindedness in matters of love, sex and intimacy. I have rarely, if ever, heard a non-savarna man refer to his ex as my 'Brahman' girlfriend or my 'Bania' ex. In some ways, the savarna woman's intimacy is also a conquest, just like that of the savarna man—the only difference is in what they pick up, what they display and what they forget.

* * *

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar married Savita in 1948. She was a Brahman. By all accounts, there was genuine affection between them, as evidenced by the many letters that have survived. Since then, tens of

thousands, if not lakhs, of inter-caste couples have married and raised families. Many have surely been happy and well-adjusted. In the relationships that did not have happy endings, it is not meant to suggest only non-savarnas would be victims. There would certainly be many instances where non-savarna men and non-savarna women were aggressors, who were nasty and foul to their savarna partners. Nothing in this chapter is meant as an essentializing commentary. Everything I have said, I can think of many exceptions to. The purpose of this discourse is not prescriptive exactitude—it is an interpretation of caste pathology. Like all interpretations of pathologies, there are exceptions, but there are also notable patterns.

The astute reader may also have noticed that this chapter has been structured in cis-heterosexual binaries. Part of that is due to adhering to the framework of Fanon. Part of it is due to my own lack of talent in pathologizing the queer possibilities within caste society. In truth, much of the queer discourse in India has been set by savarnas—to the point where much of the 'visible' queer culture has become a predominantly savarna imagination. Save for a few SC, ST and OBC queer activists and scholars, there is no diversity nor critique of how the savarna culture industry and progressive circles have flattened conversations on graded privilege and caste pride within queerness. Any attempt to highlight this is shouted down as queerphobia or bigotry (of which, admittedly, there is no scarcity).

It occurs to me that for many below the glass floor, publicly claiming queerness is an act of immense bravery, and I am in awe of those who do it every day. It is, frankly, terrifying otherwise. As I have said before (in the prologue), since I was a child, whenever I was scared, I would hide under the bed or in closets. For some reason, I am reminded of that memory now as I write these words. So I will leave the unravelling of caste and queerness to those who are not afraid and do not need to hide under the bed or inside closets.

* * *

6

Made in Heaven: Marriage and Savarna Family Shifts

1

In the first week of July 2024, many employees working in office buildings in Mumbai's Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) were asked to work from home (WFH). The COVID-19 pandemic had altered global office cultures, with many firms retaining elements of flexi-hours and WFH. However, this notice was not due to a fresh outbreak or any other public emergency. It had been issued because of a lavish Bania wedding in the neighbourhood. Anant Ambani, the youngest son of Mukesh Ambani, was getting married.

The Ambanis are among the wealthiest families on the planet. Their rapid rise was engineered by Dhirubhai Ambani, who built his fortune across multiple industries. He is often celebrated as a man who rose from modest means to build a fortune through networking genius, pushing the limits of law and harbouring a grand vision for his enterprises. What is seldom spoken about in this narrative, however, is the role his caste and kin played in building these networks.

The Banias were an integral part of the exploitative colonial economy, playing various roles—from drug smuggling to financing British adventurers in enterprise and war—while building personal fortunes through colonial economic policies.[32] Often in close alignment with the British state, the Banias used the market consolidation made possible by the empire, emigrating to its various territories to set up outposts and make small fortunes through wheeling and dealing within the system.

Dhirubhai himself went overseas in his early years, seeking wealth and opportunity in the British colony of Aden (now Yemen). Of

course, in typical savarna myth-making fashion, the narrative frames him as a self-made man: a young man from Junagadh, Gujarat, goes to the Middle East, where he works at a petrol pump and climbs his way up. This narrative ignores how he knew to go to Aden, of all places, how he made his way there, and the connections and networks that sustained him. Regardless, he returned in 1958 and, within three decades, rose to become one of India's top industrialists, counting elite film stars, politicians and bureaucrats among his close friends.

During the era of the government-regulated economy, maintaining good relations with the state was a key business strategy and one that Dhirubhai excelled at, even as some of the older Parsi and Bania capitalists stuttered. After the economic neo-liberalization of the 1990s, the Ambanis truly took flight. (The title of Chapter 3 is taken from an Ambani advertisement from the early 2000s.) In the last three decades, the Ambanis have risen to being virtually the Indian neo-royalty.

So, when their youngest son's wedding was announced, one had to imagine it would be an over-the-top affair. In that it did not disappoint. The celebrations stretched over months, with lavish pre-wedding events and soirees attended by an international guest list that included everyone from the Rothschilds to the Kardashians. It was a wedding that cost hundreds of millions of dollars, had a military airport converted into a private landing strip and virtually took over the entire Bandra Kurla Complex where, as mentioned earlier, many companies simply told employees to WFH, and the Mumbai traffic police issued an 'event only' allowance for vehicles to ply on public roads.

Yet, when the photos of the wedding ceremony came out, many conservative handles on social media were upset that the Brahman priest officiating was seated on the ground while the Ambanis sat on small elevated platforms. In truth, the Ambani wedding was attended by many shankaracharyas, priests and godmen to bless the wedding and in their presence, the Ambanis always appeared suitably 'humble' and deferential. To most observers, there is no great surprise here. The rich and the powerful in every culture often bow down to their respective religious suzerains. Any perceived slight towards the latter, no matter how rich or powerful the offender, invites criticism.

However, there was a subtle but important difference here. The

priests are Brahman. The Ambanis are Bania. While both are dwij-savarna, there is a clear graded hierarchy between the two. In the Brahmanical world, wealth is an element of power, but it has never been the most important marker. In fact, as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar pointed out, in a caste economy, the primary mode of wealth accumulation is the division of 'labourers', not labours.

The Banias may have grown in wealth and stature in the transition from British India to a Brahmanized India, but despite being among the richest families on the planet, they remain 'below' and dependent on the Brahmans. Much of their historical and contemporary wealth accumulation is built on caste stratifying both economic and labour mobility and then subverting modern banking and financial institutions to ensure that caste-marginalized communities do not get a level playing field. Manu granted commerce to the Banias, but for that, they must remain grateful to Brahmanism and proverbially know their 'place'. Thus, the Banias, like most savarnas, maintain a subconscious, subliminal ideological commitment to Brahmanism, for it is this glue that holds together their social, cultural and material existence. And no social setting lays bare this submission, this celebration, as clearly as a wedding—the most crucial site of savarna cultural reproduction and continuity. Thus, even the wedding of India's wealthiest family needs visible validation from the premium priesthood of Brahmanism.

2

Central to the previous chapter on love, sex and intimacy pathologies among savarnas was an exploration of how savarna cultural themes of self-mythologizing and curated performances shape their personal journey in choosing partners. The logical culmination of that journey is marriage. Not just because of religious or moral imperatives (and those are certainly present), but because the social event of a wedding is key to the reproduction of Brahmanical culture within the family unit. It is, in many ways, the raison d'être of many Brahmanical household practices and defines how children, particularly girls, are raised. While the wedding as a cultural institution may have incorporated cinematic spectacle and digital tools but at its core, it remains a ritualistic space for caste supremacy to manifest.

For contemporary, urban and elite savarnas—the primary focus of this book—modernity has imposed a particular kind of cultural performance. Much of this stands in contradiction to the tenets of Manu. Savarna millennials may have spent their college days idolizing Jimi Hendrix, Marx, bell hooks, Malcolm X, Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodóvar, but few are willing to build a life upon liminal transgressions or deep intimacies. In the world of savarnas, there exist no deep intimacies. The individual is so thoroughly embedded within the anthropology of the larger community that personal differentiations exist merely as variations that the community has collectively curated and anticipated.

So, a 'rebellious' youth phase—where an elite savarna teen experiments with substance abuse, unorthodox music, irreverent fashion choices, tattoos, piercings or radical political views—is not really out of syllabus, so to speak. Even the quintessential vegetarian Bania, Gandhi, ate meat in the spirit of 'experimentation'. Every generation of savarna elites over the past 150 years has had a youth cohort that, in its own self-concocted and self-validated mythology, sees itself as truly edgy, crazy and in parts revolutionary. In many savarna masculinities—especially among Brahmans and Kayasthas—this radical posturing is a key form of recreation as it validates their historical knowledge-performance roles. They pick up modes of Western rationality (both its neo-conservative and leftist strains) and model their youthful personalities on it. Such a performance often stands in contradiction to their traditional Brahmanism.

But this schism is not really a schism—it is a curation that savarna culture expects, anticipates and gladly makes space for. The elite savarna millennials of the early 2000s saw themselves as separate from their community's historical order. As young savarna men and women in their early twenties, many even espoused deep hatred towards their own parents and families. They internalized the guilt and mythologized their own persecution journey, imagining themselves as hated, marginalized and ostracized by their own kin. Many savarnas loved pretending, metaphorically (and sometimes literally), that they were orphans. It was the ultimate performance of authenticity, for in their minds, within the persecution rested authenticity.

They have never lived below the glass floor, but they know a

'below' exists. So, the suffering of the 'below world' is fetishized. Even now, many savarnas cement their credentials by how much time they have spent in the 'below world'. The horrors they claim to have seen and understood serve as a badge of legitimacy and, sometimes, a tool of seduction. Many intergenerationally wealthy and comfortable savarna men and women have gotten laid by talking about their time 'in the field' during their careers as journalists, social workers, academic researchers, teachers or some other such role.

None of this is authentic. If you have encountered this archetype and have been seduced by their story, I must break your heart. They are most likely field-frauds. Savarnas who have truly been to the 'below world'—or lived there—have PTSD, doubt and a deep churning in the stomach. It is not sexy. It is not a seduction. However, in India, there are plenty of revolutionary cosplayers among the savarnas. They have stories. Often stolen, almost always exaggerated. They should be writing scripts for Netflix shows. Alas, these stories are wasted in house parties, pubs, parks and often, bad sex.

The wedding is the site of the great savarna 'pivot' away from such banalities. It is the moment when the wayward son or the rebellious daughter returns to the fold. Savarna millennials spent their youth curating images of themselves as deeper, more interesting people. It was culturally uncool, in one's early twenties, to admit that you were looking forward to marriage—especially an arranged one. Young savarna men and women bonded over bitching about nosy aunts and uncles who frequently enquired about their marriageability. They supported each other through the 'trauma' of parental pressure to settle down. At times, it seemed that the entire youth culture of elite savarnas was anti-marriage. As mentioned earlier, this is not the case. Even elder savarnas, with knowing smiles, tease the younger ones, saying, 'We were also young once, we also talked like this. You will also change after marriage.' What they mean is that they, too, traversed similar paths and acquired the wisdom that this is an inconvenient phase that must to be moved past as savarnas come of age.

The reason this pivot back to savarna systems is so predictable is that any path leading out of the savarna fold is a scary prospect. South Asia is a society of terrifying scarcities. It is not a place where individuality, in the neo-capitalist, consumerist sense, can take root in

any meaningful way. The individual is vulnerable, exposed and perennially under siege. The state is largely absent except in an abstract way. The only insurance and assurance that an individual can somewhat legitimately summon is that of their kin, caste and community. However, that protection and safety net comes with terms and conditions. The primary demand is that the individual remains committed to upholding and maintaining their own kin, caste and the community. In a caste-stratified savarna society, adherence to the caste system is the validating definition of one's own individuality. Marriage is one of the most important social rituals where this commitment is authenticated and cemented through public witnessing and spectacle. It is also the site of the family's change of guard.

The Brahmanical family system is, at its core, a centralized and hierarchical pyramid. At the top sits the elder male patriarch, wielding major social and cultural authority—not just over his immediate family but also his extended kin. The more successful and powerful he becomes, the broader his influence extends within his community. In contrast, in many non-Brahmanical cultures, especially below the glass floor, such intense centralization is often not possible owing to the economic precarity and cultural norms that exist far from Brahmanical oversight.

While the elder male patriarch may be the nominal apex, in most nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, tribal groups and marginalized castes—many of whom have lived in harsh geographies such as mountains and deserts—women hold significant sway over collective community life. Even in a more contemporary context, the community life of many Ambedkarite Buddhist families in places like Vidarbha is largely built, run and sustained by women. There is a great degree of variation and diffusion of authority among various members of the family based on their economic and social standing.

This stands in contrast to even the elite 'progressive' savarna families. Many within this cohort believe that because their families eat meat (including beef), do not follow religious rituals and customs in everyday life, speak English fluently and are immersed in Western popular culture, they have diverged from the feudal patriarchal model of the Brahmanical family. However, this is often not true. Even in such families, much of their success and access is contingent on larger savarna social networks, which are dependent on caste-based

cooperation and coordination. Unlike caste-marginalized communities, they have no anthropological incentive to break or dilute the caste network. On the contrary, these networks have brought them great opportunity, advantage and material benefits, which are sustained through gatekeeping and excluding the marginalized.

Hence, even in such families where the women have been employed in critical jobs for generations and lifestyles are more relaxed and flexible, they are never more than one degree removed from a family member deeply steeped in caste conservatism and maintenance of the Brahmanical order. While the progressive savarna liberals may privately complain and grumble about their conservative relatives and friends, they will never truly create distance or meaningful separation from them. This is because such a separation would come at the cost of losing their cultural vocabulary and access to the social caste network with all its privileges. Even for the progressives, this is too much to process, making their anti-caste-conservatism stance suspect to begin with. At best, what they seek is to shield themselves from directly witnessing overt and covert violence of caste-barring and the gatekeeping of marginalized communities.

Thus, most savarna liberals will cultivate a deliberate ignorance. They internalize it and emerge as innocent beings—oblivious and naïve individuals who express shock only when something truly gory unfolds, such as a caste lynching, rape or student suicide. Otherwise, they are happy with the status quo, which is built on the exploitation of the bodies and labour of the marginalized castes.

The endemic insularity of progressive elite savarnas is also a function of their cultivated ignorance. Whenever I have spent time with fellow academics, civil society folks and journalists from SC, ST and OBC backgrounds, we have often bonded over the hilarious ignorance of even well-travelled, overseas-educated elite savarnas. There is a profound lack of awareness about what plurality of agency within non-savarna family units even looks like. In the absence of any meaningful comparative understanding, most savarnas fail to grasp the extent of their own monoculture.

This makes it especially difficult for the elite and educated among them to recognize that a vast majority of their community still functions as a centralized, hierarchical family and community unit under the stewardship of the elder male patriarch(s), supported ably

by the senior women of the family. This order lays down the law for the younger generation, keeps them in check, grooms and nudges them along—and sometimes even pushes them into a rebellious phase due to its overbearing control. However, as it ages, this order must pass the baton to the younger generation so the structure can repeat and reproduce itself. For this to happen, two fundamental things must occur. The young must give up their rebellion and step up to take over the family reins, and the old order must transfer their power, transitioning to to a more supportive, background role. The wedding holds such importance in savarna cultures because it is the site where both these transitions take place in a definitive way.

3

The wedding itself is not just an event—it is a process. Older patriarchs, in consultation with senior women, begin working on younger savarnas years in advance. The topic of marriage, even in elite savarna families, is often soft-launched to individuals as young as nineteen or twenty. The old order understands that the young and restless will not accept it just yet—the soft-launch is meant to gradually erode resistance. What starts as polite jokes and teasing gradually becomes more shrill and insistent as the years go by, often fraying the patience and nerves of the youth. Eventually, their anti-marriage stance weakens, and the conversation inevitably shifts from 'if' they will marry to when and whom. This is the next stage of the process. The negotiation of a 'suitable match' is based not on factors of love and compatibility, but rather on social standing, which is caste-coded.

Much of the patriarchal anxiety within Brahmanism has been about keeping 'their women' out of the gaze and path of undesirable bodies —those deemed unfit due to their caste birth being of a 'lower' origin. Although modernity has created avenues for transgression, restrictions persist at every juncture. From college hostels to corporate workspaces and as also housing for single women, even elite savarna young women continue to find their movements severely curtailed, their habits hyper-scrutinized and their personal spaces heavily surveilled. Their workspace socializing and even movement within their own neighbourhoods are intrusively monitored and regulated through a

series of informal and formal interventions.

Central to this invasive hyper-monitoring of women's autonomy is the caste-coded concept of 'izzat'. As mentioned earlier, Dalit feminists have long pointed out that the amorphous notion of community, caste pride and honour is invested in women's bodies—or rather in the possession of them. Transgressions of caste boundaries in love and marriage frequently trigger so-called 'honour killings', where 'transgressing' couples are murdered to restore the caste 'honour' of their community. The pattern of violence leans heavily on the dominant or 'upper' caste committing these acts to salvage their pride, which they believe was tainted by intermingling, possession and cohabitation with a 'lower' caste. Love across 'levels' is one of the most explosive flashpoints in a caste-stratified society.

However, not every transgression leads to brutal murders. There is a hierarchy of violence, determined by several sociological variables. The relative caste distance between partners is perhaps the most important one—the bigger the gap, the more violent the opposition. Other variables include the resources available to the 'upper' caste. A feudal, landed-agrarian Shudra caste might rely on local strongmen, whereas an educated, white-collar elite in the city may lean on police connections to act as personal goons—each indicative of the coercive reach of the eldest patriarch and his community. More polite and 'progressive' savarnas use different tactics, including emotional manipulation, physical beatings and virtual house arrest.

Over the years, I have seen the great lengths to which erstwhile loving families go to prevent young women from pursuing relationships with men they deem inappropriate. From friends to colleagues to even my students, I have seen many savarna women from wealthy, urban and elite families subjected to lockdowns, emotional blackmail, threats, isolation and systemic psychological breakdown if they resist their patriarch's wishes. The extent of such practices within so-called 'liberal' families, especially among Banias and Marwari Jains, is yet to be properly documented and researched.

Once the young woman finally breaks down and acquiesces, the trauma and mental torture is quickly put aside. The family members who led the assault are forgiven, and the mood shifts to one of celebration and spectacle.

Most savarna matches do not require such harrowing negotiations

because (as mentioned in the previous chapter) structural, cultural and aesthetic filters ensure that the pool of potential partners is already caste-matched, and choices are self-selectively caste-appropriate. Sometimes, however, there are mismatches. But if the caste gap is narrow, and both partners are highly educated and come from families with intergenerational wealth and literacy, an amicable rapprochement—after some social friction and drama—is possible, and sometimes even celebrated.

It is these socially and culturally contiguous matches that savarnas cite as proof of their progressive arrival into rational, urbane modernity. It is therefore no surprise that, for this cohort, the Shah Rukh Khan romances of the late 1990s and early 2000s are the quintessential definition of love. In many of those films, the family patriarch must validate the romance for the couple to unite. This reassurance, manifested in Bollywood love stories, helped ease savarna family anxieties—love could not simply happen without their approval. The urban professionals working thousands of kilometres away from home were not going to alter the fundamentals of their caste training.

The elite savarna youth also wholeheartedly embraced this. After all, what could be more romantic than family-legitimized, caste-compatible love? The ghost of Manu would approve. This highly educated, 'individualistic', corporate-employed, West-facing cohort normalized family approval (and, by implication, caste compatibility) as the most crucial step in choosing a partner.

Even the most critically minded savarna liberals will end up appeasing and bowing to the wishes of their family, despite recognizing the casteist and exclusionary nature of their objections. This is because when individuality and choice are pitted against the vast network of tangible and intangible family-caste privileges, the latter—as stated before—proves too intimidating and even lucrative to give up.

Thus, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) remains the cornerstone romance for many savarna millennials because it is deeply comforting. It does not force them to choose between 'family' (a euphemism for caste-network privileges) and 'love' (born of individual preference and choices). Instead, it makes the former a necessary precondition for the latter—so much so that it seems there is no contradiction between the

two at all—despite that being the premise of the film (and films of similar kind). Shah Rukh Khan cannot elope with Kajol unless her father willingly lets her go to him. His dedication to winning her father's approval—against stupendous odds—is proof of his love for her, rather than any shared life goals or the tenderness that comes from intimacy and companionship.

In any case, *DDLJ* features love between elite savarnas. Both are above the glass floor. Their social backgrounds are near identical—both come from Punjabi families with intergenerational, international mobility. Most Bollywood and regional film romances, with a few exceptions from film-makers such as Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj, Nagraj Manjule, etc., typically feature love among socially compatible savarna families, mirroring choices that play out in real life.

Where Bollywood cinema usually culminates its 'great' love stories is at the moment of the wedding itself—an event that, in and of itself, is a spectacle worth unpacking. As mentioned earlier, the wedding serves as the site for a generational transfer of power. This period in savarna life—typically in the mid- to late-twenties—is when parents, family and family friends, who had previously been the villains, suddenly begin to appear as allies. The transition gains momentum as this family machinery starts working in the interest of the savarna youth. It is a graded and nuanced performance. The older patriarch relinquishes micromanaging to mid-generational savarnas—those a few years into their married lives, now with young children. The wedding is their audition to step into the larger supervisory patriarchal roles.

Factions within the family compete for authority and control. Often, the wedding is not directly managed by the bride and groom's parents but by more ambitious, assertive relatives who 'take charge' of the preparations. It is in the 'heat of battle'—the chaos of organizing a big event—that they prove themselves. The size and splendour of the spectacle becomes their portfolio, their CV, their family-LinkedIn endorsement of sorts. Other family members slip into supporting roles like a well-oiled machine—some manage jewellery shopping, others coordinate logistics, some oversee bridal makeup, while some are in charge of 'fun'. For instance, smuggling alcohol into 'dry' weddings is a role played by the naughty young uncle or older cousin who is the bridge between the youth and the elder guard, seamlessly switching

roles between youth mentor and junior planner depending on the cohort he is with.

A close observer of a savarna wedding will notice the rise and fall, the promotion and demotion, of relatives from these roles across weddings. In that sense, it is reminiscent of corporate India. If I may dare make a hyperbolic claim, corporate culture in India is a derivative of this savarna wedding framework. Professionals rise in ranks and fortunes based on close-network endorsements and fall with shutouts and declining confidence imposed by senior figures—all within tightly gatekept, caste-sanitized spaces.

Amidst the dazzling spectacle of a typical savarna wedding, family factions compete and plot, for ultimately, the savarna wedding is just one episode in a never-ending saga unfolding across various branches of the family, with multiple weddings playing out every year. The addition of in-laws with every wedding adds complexity to this game of family thrones, while the health and stability of individual marriages and the birth of children adds or subtracts points from the overall clout of each family branch. It is only the glamour and shine of the spectacle that blinds one from this unpleasantness. Hence, the spectacle is as important as it is inherently narcissistic.

In a constantly evolving cultural smorgasbord that responds to both Western modernity and caste-traditionalism, extravagant weddings blend K-serial themes, peppy Bollywood songs and even a dash of Rihanna or Beyoncé. Elaborate sets, menus with hundreds of dishes and invites packed with luxury gifts are now standard fare for these over-the-top weddings. The ever-growing list of set-pieces includes pre-wedding festivities, glucose drip tents for revellers to rejuvenate and hydrate from hangovers, and specialized wedding choreographers who craft sangeet dance routines featuring close friends and family members. A veritable cottage industry of rich savarna hobbyists has sprung up, offering specialized services for everything from customized wedding cakes, candid and drone photography to wedding and honeymoon planning—all geared towards making the *shaadi* an extravagant experience.

Yet, the more extravagant these weddings become, the more they appear the same. The absurdity of the glamour ends up flattening the shine. The Anant Ambani–Radhika Merchant wedding, the pinnacle of this kind of spectacle, is a fine example of this. By the end, the

wedding itself had devolved into so many set-pieces and outrageous displays of luxury that even the ever-hungry paparazzi and entertainment press appeared jaded—the spectacle had exceeded its own capacity to shock and dazzle. In that, the most savarna wedding exposed all the grand savarna weddings for what they essentially are—hollow, narcissistic family-branding performances, sustained by the willing consensus of the young, the old and everyone in between, all jostling and cooperating in unison.

The process of a savarna wedding does not end with the spectacle of the ceremony. It extends into the following years, as newlyweds are hosted by important relatives for meals and other social engagements. This post-marriage 'tour' is a public cementing of the new couple within the larger family unit. While the atmosphere at these visits appears warm and inviting, after the couple leaves, the relatives audit and analyse their behaviour.

The tour is also a great exercise in introducing the couple to their respective in-laws in a more intimate environment. Young couples will also start making their own assessments of which relatives from either side of the family are more compatible with their own lifestyle, ideas and ambitions. These impressions (and alliances) will be strengthened in the coming years, particularly as other weddings take place. In the heat of planning and organizing, the couple will discover who their true allies are. Apart from reinforcing the insular family dynamic, these associations also facilitate business growth. Relatives are a great network for securing jobs, investment opportunities and business placements for children, friends and associates, while reciprocating the same for others.

The entire neural pathway of the savarna network flows through the savarna wedding. This is why the obsessive segregation of 'undesirable' marital matches remains at the core of the Brahmanical social order.

4

I mentioned earlier that elite savarna cultural 'innocence' is a product of a certain kind of liberal performance. This progressiveness could not hold a mirror to itself if it were honest about the extent of caste brutality in this society. This cultivated innocence creates a form of

knowledge insularity—an echo chamber so strong that for most savarnas, it becomes impossible to understand any social motivation different from their own.

Many readers of this chapter may be wondering: 'What is so savarna about the wedding dynamics mentioned here? Family anxieties over the social compatibility of marriage partners, inter-family rivalries and alliances manifesting themselves during weddings, and the commitment to spectacle surely take place across communities, even among SC, ST and OBC groups. What is so Brahmanical about this? He's just adding the term "savarna" in front of regular social commentary and trying to make it about caste.'

I anticipate such arguments because, at first glance, weddings may appear the same across the board to the savarna gaze—except, perhaps, in the amount of money that some families splurge on them. This is why it is useful to understand weddings and the plural roles they play in non-savarna communities. Socially, they are different, even though superficially they may appear very similar to savarna weddings.

Communities outside the dwij-savarna framework are numerous and diverse, with significant regional and cultural variations. However, in many cases, certain commonalities can be broadly observed. As mentioned earlier, the family unit in many such communities is less patriarchally centralized. Even when the patriarch holds a significant position in family life, his authority is not comparably encompassing and is diffused across multiple points of agency.

In communities that have transitioned from landlessness and/or semi-nomadic lifestyles to being landed and settled within the last two to three generations, a key feature of this change has been an increase in the feudal authority of the patriarch. Many communities, usually categorized as OBCs and, in some cases, SC and ST, have been aggregated within post-colonial India in ways that have rendered much of their previously pluralistic ways of life unsustainable. Over the past several decades, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and many of its sister organizations have done much groundwork within such communities.[33]

The centrality of Brahmanical gods, rituals, festivals, imagery and eventually, political agenda, has been structurally incepted over time. The BJP's political success in the last decade owes much to this long-

term community work done by its ideological parent organization. As these communities are incorporated into the Brahmanical framework, the ritual authority of Brahmans intensifies, reinforced by patriarchal figures within the family. In many cases, the former strengthens the latter. The Brahmanical cultural order makes space for hyperlocal sociopolitical organizing, often through temples, trusts, kirtans and the like. The role of men from non-savarna communities in sustaining these initiatives brings them prestige and a degree of material standing, to the extent that, in many cases, such adherence becomes the defining marker of 'coming of age' or acceptance among oppressed caste communities.

This must not be confused with a democratization of Brahmanism. 'Hindu social reform' has been a core agenda of the savarna consensus since the British began conducting caste censuses. It is a social engineering model designed to soften some of Brahmanism's more extreme humiliations. Much has been written about this by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar himself, as well as by scholars in subsequent decades who have analysed the saffronization of India. These works have highlighted the connections between the RSS's grassroots work, the role of state television in broadcasting *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* in the late 1980s and 1990s, and the framing of Indian Muslims in particular as the 'other' to bind together a nominally encompassing 'Hindu' identity.[34]

Since the 1990s in particular, with the rise of cable TV and Bollywood's pivot from working-class themes to savarna family dramas, the savarna wedding has acquired a pan-Indian cultural dimension. In my own fieldwork for various projects over the years, I have travelled extensively across rural and semi-urban Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Kashmir, Haryana and Punjab. Across these diverse geographies and cultures, I have often seen how the Bollywoodized shaadi has become a sort of cultural marker. It serves as the template for organizing a 'grand' wedding. The Bollywood shaadi is, by default, a 'savarna' wedding.

In 1994, Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* became a massive hit. The film was essentially an extended song-and-dance sequence celebrating every small ritual surrounding a savarna wedding. It also cemented the theme, discussed in the previous chapter, of youth surrendering their love rather than rebelling—unless their union was

approved by family elders. Beyond this, the film also brought to the screen the multiple functions of a 'savarna wedding'.

A few years later, in 1999, Sooraj Barjatya returned with *Hum Saath-Saath Hain*, another Brahman family wedding drama. Interestingly, in this film, there is a scene where the newly married bride is 'introduced' to her new family. The younger members of the household put on an elaborate song-and-dance routine, cosplaying as various family members while the rest of the family sits in the audience and applauds lovingly. This initiation ritual has now become a feature of many elaborate savarna weddings, where choreographed dance sequences have become a staple. The Ambani wedding also included such a sequence—a clear example of how Bollywood has normalized savarna weddings, alongside a whole range of TV and over-the-top (OTT) shows that continue to attract large viewership.

If a casual observer is unable to distinguish the social structuring and order of savarna weddings from others, it is possibly due to the cultural standardization that has developed in this context over the last few decades. In many non-savarna cultures, the wedding is (and in some ways remains) not an intra-family competition but a community event. In my father's community, for instance, weddings are not a family event but a village event. In an environment where most families are asset-starved and vulnerable, pooling resources is a practical necessity. The wedding functions as a dialogue between various community members. Labour is shared at nominal costs and the negotiations around the wedding become a foundation for building cooperative structures. This is not to idealize or romanticize such systems, as they had—and continue to have—their own limitations and challenges, but fundamentally, the wedding operated as a different social construct.

Among Ambedkarite Buddhist communities, which I was fortunate enough to live and work among briefly, the wedding is also an assertion of community. Ritualistically, it differs greatly from Brahmanical weddings, but even otherwise, a big-budget Buddhist wedding is framed and understood as an Ambedkarite celebration. It is not merely one family's joy; rather, the spectacle of the wedding is seen as evidence of the entire community's rise. Similarly, among different tribal communities, the wedding has a community-oriented role. Alongside death rites and other significant occasions, weddings

become an important site for reaffirming kinship bonds within the tribe and community.

These and many adjacent pluralistic imaginations of what weddings can be are increasingly being flattened into a savarna monoculture. This savarna shaadi monoculture grows in scope every year, to the point that even savarna cultural plurality in east, south and western India appears to be getting subsumed within its cultural expanse. Even Bengali, Odia, Telugu and Tamil weddings—especially in wealthy, elite urban savarna families—are now incorporating the Bollywoodized 'Punjabi-Khatri' shaadi aesthetic, transforming them into giant, corporate intra-family reality TV spectacles. Unlike reality TV, however, it is unclear who the audience for this sort of a show is. Even as all elite savarna weddings collapse into hashtags, curated events, themed merchandise and multiple camera crews, they broadcast narcissistically to an imagined audience.

At the time of writing, JioHotstar is currently streaming 'Valley of Gods, Jamnagar,' a nearly 40-minute long feature-film level production of the Ambani wedding festivities which they describe as a 'celebration of Indian arts and culture', full of 'vedic chants' and 'divine music'. Savarna wedding planners will definitely watch carefully and take notes. From the pre-wedding soirees to sangeet stage design, everything will be studied and recreated for other savarnas with smaller budgets, yet still eager to flex and flaunt. In these inevitable recreations, it remains to be seen whether the Brahman priest will be made to sit on the floor while the family takes its place on platforms.

* * *

7

Savarna Spiritual Gharwapasi from the 'Development' Valhalla

1

Ranveer (Arora) Allahbadia, better known as BeerBiceps, is one of India's most popular YouTubers. At the time of writing this book, he has over 10 million subscribers. On 8 March 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi felicitated him with the 'Disruptor of the Year' award at the National Creators Award ceremony. Modi set aside his typically stern persona and engaged in what appeared to be spontaneous banter with Ranveer. With the 2024 Lok Sabha elections just months away, many speculated that Modi's uncharacteristic warmth stemmed from Ranveer's incredible reach and influence. At a time when much of mainstream TV news media is seen almost exclusively as a mouthpiece for the ruling party, perhaps the BJP believed that Ranveer's platform would offer an avenue for organic, authentic outreach ahead of what promised to be a hard-fought election (the results proved those anxieties well-founded).

Like many youth-facing savarna social media influencers of this era, Ranveer claims to be politically 'neutral' and does not openly endorse a political party, unlike many older savarna media personalities. In fact, he even made a cameo in a scathing 2016 viral sketch about Modi's demonetization policy put out by the then-popular savarna comedy collective AIB. However, a closer look at his content, persona and interests strongly suggests his ideological leanings. A major portion of his popular podcast, *The Ranveer Show*, features predominantly savarna religious interlocutors discussing the divine, pseudo-histories, the paranormal, spirits and rituals of all sorts. Much of this is framed as a decolonizing exercise, with guests presenting

their narratives as the 'real truth' that has been suppressed by the 'left' or the 'liberals'.

Ranveer is not alone. Several big podcasters and YouTubers follow a similar template, often featuring the same guests talking about the same topics.

In this period, some of the most successful films from the Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada film industries have been based on similar themes of pseudo-history, the paranormal and religious epics. There is either an attempt to reinterpret Hindu mythology through modern themes—such as the recent *Kalki 2898 AD*, and the comparatively less successful *Brahmāstra*—or a focus on historical and epic fantasy reimaginings, shot on a scale of grandeur that earlier seemed unimaginable and unaffordable in the Indian film industry. The *Baahubali* films, *RRR* and the *Ponniyin Selvan* films are good examples of this. Even low-budget paranormal-themed films such as *Kantara* and *Stree* have been wildly successful.

Sitting alongside these is a slew of surreal patriotic films, such as the YRF Spy Universe films and Rohit Shetty's Cop Universe, which mark a return to a no-nonsense masculinity that stops at nothing to achieve desired results for love and country. Strip away the patriotism and what remains is the raw celebration of a larger-than-life, impatient, quick-tempered and flawed masculine hero—almost a modern tragic figure doomed by his own raw passions. This archetype is embodied in *Animal*, *Kabir Singh* and *Arjun Reddy* with similar shades seen in iconic characters from *KGF* and the *Pushpa* films.

It goes without saying that many of these films and podcasts are successful because they are well-produced. Many attempts to create similar productions have flopped—but even so, there is a cultural moment that is playing out, and it deserves a closer look. The mass audience driving these YouTubers, films and other such cultural productions is not composed of elite savarnas. In fact, it is a mass rejection of the elite savarna cultural machine, which for the past two decades dictated what was cool, what was aspirational and what was unacceptably cringe.

Instead, elite savarnas have pivoted to cater to the tastes and ideas of the masses—but it is a little more than that. In that pivot is also a regression from the performance of woke modernity that savarna elites had spent the previous decade and half curating. This

generational micro-cohort, which in their youth dismissed Hindi films as tacky, has now rediscovered Shah Rukh Khan as an icon of ultimate coolness. The same cohort that once mocked 'superstitious traditions' as backward and archaic is now downloading Vaastu Shastra apps and passionately discussing the physics of the Ram Setu bridge.

There is a wholehearted return to the fold—of nativity, of tradition, of caste—albeit with a *tadka* of English articulation and a performance of scientific sophistry. In the previous chapter, we explored savarna experiments with radical posturing and their eventual return to fold in the context of marriage. While that was examined as an individual life-stage phenomenon, a similar generational pattern is playing out among the millennial elite savarnas.

2

The elite state–corporate set-up of the savarna nation(s) as expanded upon in Chapters 2 and 3 was reimagining the future of Indian society during the 2000s and early 2010s. Any discourse emanating from below the glass floor was either shut down or dismissed. During this period, grassroots democratic rebellions led by caste-marginalized mobilizations were thoroughly discredited by the elite savarna cultural apparatus.

Politicians like Mayawati, Rabri Devi and Lalu Yadav were routinely mocked by savarna comedians, academics and celebrities alike. Dominant OBC and landed Shudra groups—such as Yadavs, Jats, Kunbis, Reddys, Patidars and Vokkaligas—had, between the 1970s and 2000s, created their own powerful regional political formations. These formations had locally created some semblance of legislative autonomy from Brahman–Kayastha–Bania/Khatri savarna hegemony. While these communities were somewhat successful in pushing back against epistemic caste oppression by leveraging their landed material power, they also emerged as immediate flashpoints for inflicting (often literal) violence upon castes 'below' them, primarily SCs and STs, but also weaker sections of OBCs and DNT communities.

From this churning arose the Bahujan movement—a political and cultural experiment in democracy. As discussed in Chapter 3, the movement was spearheaded by the vision and indefatigable spirit of Saheb Kanshiram. The 'Bahujan' identity was pioneered as an

umbrella group for socially uniting hundreds of castes into a political commonwealth. Returning to the metaphor of individual castes operating as their own nations, all stacked on top of each other—this was a true nation-building political project that aimed to unite different caste agendas among marginalized communities. It also sought to break the political clientelism of savarna super-elites, which had been entrenched through decades of Congress rule in Delhi. Much like the darbars of old, the Congress centre bargained with local feudal lords for regional control while setting national policies and institutions by its own will.

The Bahujan movement should have been celebrated by civil society and progressive elements as a triumph of democracy and political faith among some of the most marginalized and dispossessed people in the nation. Instead, it was widely derided, discredited and dismissed. The most educated mocked the political movement organized and sustained by the most marginalized.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, the political momentum of all these movements had started to shift. The elite savarna cultural machinery had framed these leaders as feudal and was looking ahead to 'development'-oriented political figures. We briefly discussed Chandrababu Naidu's tryst with big business friendly policies in the early 2000s. This same positioning was being tried out by Nitish Kumar in Bihar, Pramod Mahajan (till his untimely death) in Maharashtra, and even young Akhilesh Yadav—the scion of Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party—in Uttar Pradesh, who was initially soft-launched as a US-educated, 'upgraded' and modern avatar of his father's agrarian 'Yadav' OBC politics.

Around the same time, Jayant Singh, the Dallas-born grandson of Jat patriarch Chaudhary Charan Singh, made a similarly framed political debut in 2009. A young Rahul Gandhi was also starting to talk about development while undercutting Mayawati's base in Uttar Pradesh through his outreach among SC communities in the region. However, among all these contenders, none was more successful in seizing the 'development' narrative as a political maxim than the then-chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

Taking over as chief minister in late 2001 from the veteran Keshubhai Patel, Modi's hold on the throne was tenuous to begin with. The BJP was beginning to flounder in the state, the relief efforts

following the devastating Bhuj earthquake earlier that year had left many stakeholders unhappy, and Modi's own lack of experience in political administration was being held against him.

However, just months after taking office, in February 2002, Gujarat erupted in communal violence. The burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in Godhra led to violent reprisals against Muslims in the state, resulting in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of over a lakh people into refugee camps across the state. Many elements in civil society alleged, with varying degrees of credibility, that Modi had been complicit in orchestrating the pogrom to cement his position in Gujarat.[35] While the nature and extent of the latter's intent and actions remains open to discussion and research, Modi did manage to win the 2002 Gujarat election quite comfortably.

Despite this political success, he was shunned by political leaders, civil society and celebrities alike. In 2005, the US Department of State denied him a visa on account of his role in the 2002 pogrom. His political reputation as a communal hardliner now threatened to become the albatross that would limit his ambitions for growth and glory. Even as he consolidated power in Gujarat—checkmating rivals and friends alike while growing in stature—Modi started reinventing himself as India's ultimate development-oriented politician.

We have previously discussed how, in 2006, Ratan Tata was on a mission to manufacture the Tata Nano, a micro hatchback designed for urban driving. With a base price close to Rs 1 lakh, it was intended to be the cheapest car in the world, making car ownership accessible to tens of thousands, if not lakhs of first-time buyers. This plan was reminiscent of the business models and industry enthusiasm of that era (as discussed in Chapter 2), which was convinced that there was a fortune to be made at the 'bottom of the pyramid' and all that was needed to unlock the potential was the correct pricing or distribution strategy. The collective delusion of savarna capital and thinkers alike was so deeply blind to the absolute material economic crisis facing large sections of the population that there was no caution or plan 'B'.

Ratan Tata's plant was to be set up in Singur, West Bengal, against the will of many local farmers whose lands were to be acquired for the project.[36] The state government, under communist chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee—who was eager to shed his anti-capitalist reputation and project himself as a 'development-oriented' leader—

tried to suppress the protests with a heavy hand. The crackdown led to bloodshed, and the project became mired in a public relations scandal. Buddhadeb paid a heavy political price as his regime never fully recovered, and the protests gave a new lease of life to the then-waning political career of Mamata Banerjee, who stormed to power in the next election and remains in power to this day.

Meanwhile, Ratan Tata emerged largely unscathed by the controversy, with the savarna machinery viewing him with sympathy as a man who was trying to transform India into a global player in the automobile industry, only to be obstructed by the feudal interests of backward masses. It was simply assumed that Tata's car would be a great product with solid engineering and would deliver on its mega overpromise. As it turned out, it was not and it did not. Manufacturing a roadworthy car at such a low price point was a significant challenge, and all the corners that were cut to meet the price tag ultimately rendered the Nano a car that nobody wanted to own or drive.

However, the ultimate beneficiary of this saga was the chief minister of Gujarat, who promptly offered space for the factory in his state after the project became bogged down by controversy in Bengal. Modi's enthusiasm, efficiency and speed in facilitating the transfer underlined his credentials as a man that savarna corporate India could do business with. The fact that the car ultimately flopped was irrelevant to the larger story—it reinvented him as a politician who (according to savarnas) had the will, vision and strength to power through the sociocultural challenges of doing business. In other words, they started to see him as someone who would prioritize savarna corporate interests over those who were seen as clinging to backwardness.

This won over most of the liberal elite savarnas, who were earlier uneasy with his reputation as a Hindutva champion. He became their hero with this pivot as a strongman who could, and would, use his muscle to override even the legitimate concerns of the marginalized to push savarna capital interests. It was therefore not surprising that Ratan Tata became one of the first mainstream figures to endorse Modi as a possible future prime minister of India.

Large sections of the country required a different kind of market and cultural imagination—one that could expand the consuming classes and lift hundreds of millions out of poverty. Instead, the

pathway offered was designed to benefit a very small cohort of urban elite savarnas, who hacked their way into financial windfalls through technical education and market ventures—most of which remain headquartered in just the top four or five metropolitan centres to this day.

By the time 'entrepreneurship' and 'start-ups' became the magic buzzwords powering India's growth story, the timeline for achieving the country's 'developed nation' status had been quietly pushed from 2020 to 2047. India's masses do not lack enterprise, resourcefulness or creativity. Innovating decentralized development models, giving agency to the people, making credit accessible and encouraging business scale and supply based on regional customizations could have unleashed a market revolution.

Of course, this is easier said than done in a society where every caste within the 'masses' acts in its own tangible interest, and any attempt to grant credit access, risk management, insurance instruments or material support would create conflicts of interests among often-competing, analogous caste groups. This required (and still requires) a deft touch and pioneering policy models based on a deep understanding of resource scarcity, economic precarity and the caste-kinship-based social support that families rely on to manage fiscal risk.

The elite savarnas who were firmly in the driver's seat by the late 2000s attempted none of this. Instead, they were content to role-play as business tycoons through PowerPoint presentations and self-serious corporate pageantry. They were carried away by the dreams of an Indian market that (inside their fevered imaginations) was already only its way to realizing its potential—without any serious engagement or planning on how to actually get there. In fact, any suggestion that they were on the wrong path or that India was unlikely to get there was met with sarcastic dismissal. The elite savarnas of the era did not want to hear any of that. They called it negativity and lack of ambition. An 'Indian mindset' that was scared to succeed.

In Modi's rise, they had found their champion. *He* would make it possible. Thus took flight their dream of India as a superpower—measured, as always, by one primary yardstick: how white, Western countries talked about India. As editorials proclaimed that the twenty-

first century would belong to Asia—that China and India were destined to leave behind an ageing Europe and a fading USA—the elite savarnas comically began to believe they were almost there.

In 2007, the country's leading newspaper (and flagship of its largest media conglomerate) the *Times of India* released an inspirational advertisement featuring the Kayastha superstar, Amitabh Bachchan (who allegedly agreed to film the copy because it was so 'inspiring'). It was titled 'India vs India'. Set against the backdrop of the then-under-construction Bandra–Worli Sea Link—an intended, dramatic metaphor for nation-building—Bachchan, in his trademark grave baritone, began:

'There are two Indias in this country.
One India is straining at the leash,
eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives
that the world has been recently showering upon us.
The other India is the leash.

One India says give me a chance and I'll prove myself.
The other India says prove yourself first,
and maybe then you'll have a chance.
One India lives in the optimism of our hearts.
The other India lurks in the scepticism of our minds.

One India wants, the other India hopes.
One India leads, the other India follows.'

While not quite bearing the tragicomic farcical overtones of the Reliance 'Karlo Duniya Mutthi Mein' ad referenced in Chapter 3, this succinctly sums up the savarna mood of that era. It is clear which India the elite savarns considered themselves part of. The Times Group—a Jain–Bania family-owned enterprise—through its newspapers, TV news channels and myriad media businesses, saw large sections of India's population—the masses below the glass floor—as timid, cynical and risk-averse conservatives who did not believe that meaningful change was possible. And like the Jain–Banias, other savarna capitalists, such as Narayana Murthy and company, along with savarna cultural icons, civil society persons and academics, thought the same.

They all imagined themselves as the daring vanguard, leading and shepherding these timid masses towards a promised Valhalla of megacities with gleaming steel and glass towers, Starbucks and F1 races, bullet trains and mega highways—a land that white Western tourists would be dying to visit, stay in and make careers in.

In the politics of a bygone era—the early 1970s to be precise—the slogan '*Garibi Hatao, Desh Bachao*' (remove poverty, save the nation) had electrified the popular imagination. Then it atrophied as the masses began to lose hope of any real change. It was a broad idea that everyone supported, but it was also clear that nothing substantial was going to happen. Slowly, the slogan lost its sting, though by sheer momentum and rote, it carried on electorally until it was quietly retired sometime in the 1980s.

By 2020, 'development' and 'double-engine sarkaar' had also started to become toothless slogans like garibi hatao, repeated ad nauseam in election cycles but without any real meaning. It was a broad plan of 'development' with no attention to detail or roadmap outlining what it actually meant or how to achieve it.

The technical education institutions established in the 1990s and 2000s made a killing financially, while the entrance exam coaching industry has grown so big that it will soon be worth more than the entire education budget of the Indian nation. Yet, more and more people every year have started abandoning this pathway, as engineering, management and tech job salaries have been stagnating while course fees have been skyrocketing. And so the great Indian dream of the 1990s—of educating your child and catapulting them within a single generation from poverty into affluence—has started to lose its sheen.

With no meaningful pathways for upward mobility, vast sections of people beneath the glass floor began to expect welfare state intervention once again. Post-COVID-19 electoral politics signalled a return to the 'big' state, with major policy shifts centred around welfare schemes such as Ladli Behna Yojana, farm loan waivers, old pension schemes, free bus rides for women and similar interventions.

The elite savarna reaction to these developments has been almost comical—like deer caught in headlights, paralysed by the enormity of the task, standing helpless in the face of a 100-foot tsunami. However, instead of any sobering reflection, they have responded with a temper

tantrum. Chafing at the return of the state as a welfare provider, this section of savarnas started crying out against the government for exhausting its funds on 'handouts'. Their contempt briefly found a voice in their champion when, in 2022, Prime Minister Modi warned that the culture of giving *rewari* (sweets) to voters as handouts would stall the development of airports, expressways and other critical nation-building infrastructure. However, electoral realpolitik has ensured that even his own party, the BJP, has had to build its election campaigns in many states around such welfare policies.

Now, even their champion has seemingly toned down such rhetoric after the chastening victory in the 2024 national elections. Though he returned to power, his government needs support from political allies he had previously cut down to size. As the political landscape shifts to find a new paradigm, for the first time in almost thirty years, elite urban savarnas are not at the centre of things. Politics, popular culture, policy—everything seems to have left them behind.

3

In 1947, Siegfried Kracauer wrote *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, which examines German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s, with its dark, often paranormal themes that blurred the lines of morality and reality. The films reflected a post-First World War Germany struggling to piece itself back together—at a time when Hitler had not fully arrived on the political stage. Kracauer was particularly interested in how these films, with their heavily stylized sets, ghoulish make-up and unsettling themes, signified a retreat into the darker recesses of the collective consciousness of a traumatized German society. He suggests it was not surprising that on the other side of the tunnel that German imagination withdrew into, fascism emerged. In Hitler, Germany found a 'saviour' who, in true Expressionist fashion, might as well have been a golem resurrected from stone and brought to life—an angel who was, in fact, evil.

The book is a fantastic thesis and deep dive into the world of cinema, psychology and social politics, but its direct correlations are difficult to fully defend. Kracauer's work has been criticized as a 'historical imaginary', which on closer scrutiny cannot fully justify the

collective 'descent' into Nazism and the cult of the Führer. Nonetheless, as a narrative device, it offers a compelling method to theorize about the cultural crisis among elite, urban savarnas, who are being increasingly sidelined by the very India they were trying to transform.

I have already mentioned the overtones of contempt and complaint in recent savarna narratives about politics and culture, as well as the thought-paralysis stemming from the lack of collective intellectual capacity to meaningfully engage with the very real economic and social crises piling up around them. I am also very interested in understanding the cumulative effect of this on the collective savarna psyche. Does it break? Does it retreat into a proverbial darker place—a world of ghouls, gargoyles and golems—only to emerge as a harder, more ruthless, relentless race devoid of joy, pity or empathy? Or does it stonewall itself into denial, delusion and delirium?

If such a theorization is possible, one may observe patterns of the latter. The elite urban savarna millennials are ageing into a disturbing denial. In their collective psyche, it is still 2007. The Bandra–Worli Sea Link is still under construction, and Amitabh Bachchan is still waxing poetic about the new India destined for the skies. Mentally, they have never left that space—the glorious (and misplaced) optimism of their youth, of their role as the transformational elites building a new India, is still alive somewhere inside their heads.

It is a fantasy of an India where the dollar is weaker than the rupee, where white migrants come to our shores to work petty jobs, where other countries bow to savarna industry and political leaders, hoping for their favour. A world where others learn Indian languages, eat savarna food and follow savarna religion and rituals. While much of that fantasy is difficult to tangibly defend or realize, the cultural and religious aspects are within reach. The emphasis on savarna culture, religion and rituals has become the last reassuring bastion—one where elite savarnas can feel they succeeded or are succeeding. It is their last great stand.

Without a champion and unable to transform or fix the Indian economy, market or sociopolitical landscape, they have reinvented themselves as great cultural–religious warriors. This generational swing mirrors the individual life cycles of savarnas, who in their youth are radical but ultimately embrace traditional patriarchy in later years

(as discussed in Chapter 6). On a collective level, a deeper meaning may be read here—the return to religion signifies the failure of the elite savarnas who set out to mark themselves as modern, West-facing and scientifically grounded. Since this cohort has a knowledge-production monopoly on almost all English-language cultural and artistic avenues, no great books, films, TV series or comedies can be expected to show up this cohort as monuments of mediocrity and overreaching egos. Instead, they have acquired a soft, apologetic and at times defiant tone in justifying their regression into Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The phantasm of the 'vedic supremacy' of Brahmanism is the last refuge of elite savarnas, because before the markers of Western modernity made them 'elite', they were dwij first. It is in that epistemic root that they feel unchallenged and superior in a way that no material reality can justify. They may have failed to create a global superpower, but as Brahmans and dwijs, they remain 'above'. Tradition becomes a reassuring retreat. No wonder so many college-campus Marxist or feminist savarnas are rediscovering or reinventing themselves as true *dharmic* devotees in their thirties and forties. In doing so, new dialects are emerging—ones that attempt to reconcile the contradictions of modernity with the irrationality of caste Brahmanism.

It is in this context that we return to Ranveer (Arora) Allahbadia, the podcaster. He emerged as a fitness YouTuber under the handle 'BeerBiceps', which by his own admission was a name built to attract a more 'global' audience. He believed that presenting himself as 'Ranveer Allahbadia' would not be catchy enough to attract elite or non-Indian audiences. Additionally, he felt his Hindi was not strong enough, which he assumed would be a barrier to reaching a non-elite audience—people living beneath the glass floor, for instance. The 'Beer' in his title was a reference to his college partying lifestyle, and the contrast between beer and biceps made the name catchy and memorable.

From the outset, Ranveer had a sharp eye for audience and branding. He understood digital trends well and quickly carved a niche for himself online while networking with other rising savarna stars offline. Like many other elite savarna youth of that era, Ranveer too would have seen himself as part of a cohort that considered being

critical and speaking ‘truth to power’ to be ‘cool’.

Political comedy in the US was entering its most woke phase, and much of that rhetoric started seeping into the elite savarna sphere, which was always eager to consume the liberal exports from white Americana. Hence, being critical of the government became something elite liberal savarna youth increasingly leaned into during the churning years from 2010 to about 2016. It was during this period that a great schism appeared to have formed within the once-unified elite savarna sphere.

Beginning around 2010–11, the savarna-led anti-corruption movement, operating under the banner ‘India Against Corruption’, began to peak, aiming all its big guns against the incumbent UPA government led by the Congress. While the movement framed itself as politically neutral at the time, the trajectory of many of its key figures since then has lent credence to the discourse that it was, in some way, endorsed and supported by the vast RSS ground network built across dozens of organizations in different regions across India.

Anna Hazare, an old Gandhian hand, was plucked from his village in Maharashtra and put on the national stage in Delhi as an unassailable icon of incorruptibility, whose fast unto death was an outcry against the rampant dishonesty in the political system. Supporting him both on the stage and off it were spiritual gurus like Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, savarna liberal activists like the Bhushans, Kiran Bedi, ex-army General V.K. Singh and, in the centre of it all, the unrelenting icon of the rising Bania leader, Arvind Kejriwal. His credentials were promoted as a former IIT graduate who was now an anti-corruption crusader.

While a clueless Congress scrambled to control the narrative, the entire savarna discourse machinery turned against the regime. The exact mechanics of this pivot and how it was orchestrated (or was it organic?) are not fully understood and may never be, but by 2013, it was clear that the UPA government was on its way out. The savarna elite youth had found in UPA and Congress a soft target on which to train their ‘critical lens’—to speak ‘truth to power’. It was a regime that was not punitive towards savarna critique. In fact, liberal urban savarnas were a social cohort that the Congress had created, nurtured and sustained through its gatekept institutions, policies and quid pro quo interventionism—so the flip of this cohort took the party by

surprise. It was not going to squash dissent coming some these quarters. Indeed many liberal savarnas look back to this period of Congress rule with some nostalgia of how you could critique the state and not face brutal repercussions. Ironically, it was this paralysis of action which created political vacuum and chaos.

As mentioned, amid this chaos rose the icon of Modi. He was perhaps not the plan (if at all there was one) for the forces that created the political vacuum, but he was the one who seized the moment. By the time India went to elections in 2014, it was clear that he was going to emerge as prime minister. The 'Modi wave' it was called. A savarna public opinion tsunami. Hardly any appendage of the elite savarna system interrogated it. Even journalists who had once tormented Modi when he was seen as a regional strongman now seemed sheepish, contrite or eager to make amends. The entire phalanx of media and cultural institutions began shifting to embrace the messiah who would save the pro-savarna market interests.

Savarna elite liberals who formed the 'Lutyens' Delhi' intelligentsia —an informal network whose mark on policy and statecraft far exceeded their positions, operating through a labyrinthian network of parties, gatherings and invite-only events—seemed eager to work with Modi. They were ready for a regime change and to welcome a new guard.

Modi, however, has proved to be his own man. With keen political instinct, he leaned more on the Sangh framework that had served him well. He perhaps also remembered how the savarna liberal machinery had almost succeeded in making him persona non grata earlier. So, rather than relying on the Delhi savarna liberal darbar, he maintained only a transactional relationship with savarna media and civil society, pushing them into increasingly sycophantic arcs as they scrambled to outdo one another in hopes of securing favour from the new regime.

As the plots and coups, alignments and reconfigurations played out above the glass floor among different sections of the savarnas, one major consequence was the successful dilution of the political mobilizations by marginalized communities. These mobilizations had, in the preceding decades, created significant bargaining power with the savarna state. As the elite savarna cultural machinery reached its development crescendo and the savarna–corporate state came into its full form, it became clear that it would try to snuff out every vestige

of political and cultural agency that the marginalized had painstakingly won through generational organizing since the 1960s (and even before).

The vocabulary of caste, as a lens to analyse non-savarna perspectives or resistance, all but disappeared from savarna elite discourse during this period. The 'Modi wave' was not just about Modi. It was a political tidal force, the manifestation of the collective elite savarna desire to sideline and erase what they saw as the troublesome, insular and backward mindset of 'lower' caste politics and politicians. The future was going to be all IT, airports, skyscrapers, fashion weeks—and it was all going to be in English. Modi, they believed, was the man who could deliver on this.

In return for getting there, the elite savarnas were ready to to overlook the BJP and RSS's long history and conflicted history with the 'liberal' values they once performatively espoused, and to let themselves be shaped and crafted by Modi's persona. This was a project where all savarna billionaires, cultural icons and civil society figures were welcome, as long as they paid homage to the icon of Modi. Any pretence of a Rousseau–Voltaire liberal ethic of dissent and critique was quickly abandoned as a new elite savarna formation coalesced around him.

It was around this time that figures like Ranveer also began rediscovering themselves as spiritual influencers. How much of this was an organic evolution—a person simply finding himself—and how much of it was getting caught up in the generational rip tide (or even careful self-curation to fit in), we may never know. But the BeerBiceps who emerged on the other side had embraced a teetotaller lifestyle and reinvented himself as a desi Joe Rogan-esque podcast host.

At the time of writing, the 'Joe Rogan Experience' is arguably the world's most successful and influential podcast. Rogan hosts an eclectic mix of MMA fighters, comedians, conspiracy theorists, right-wing thinkers, and, on occasion, even critical left-liberal politicians, activists and most recently, a presidential candidate. His impact on US culture, policy and politics is immense.

Ranveer and many other savarnas have aspired to that level of cultural influence—where the podcasting mic enables them to curate the cultural zeitgeist while at the same time being curated by it. Instead, however, as mentioned earlier, Ranveer's podcast has

collected an assortment of sensationalist, clickbait characters including Bollywood personalities, armed forces-aligned professionals, right-wing commentators, savarna comedians and influencers, Hindu monks, paranormal observers and sex pundits. It is a programming mix that many successful savarna podcasters have tried to recreate. Yet, even as viewership numbers rise, within a small section of elite savarnas, 'BeerBiceps' has become a joke. They routinely mock his interview style, his choice of guests and the overall intellectual aura he represents through his programming.

Modi won the sycophantic compliance of large sections of the cultural and discourse machinery—but the peak elite, English-speaking urban savarna liberals still found his apparatus crude. His era reshaped the savarna public sphere in his own image, yet, as mentioned earlier, he did not fully integrate the old savarna elites, keeping them at arm's length. This cohort had been in the mix of power since the days of Nehru and the founding of the new republic. While Modi himself has largely been spared direct assault, his supporters have been branded by this cohort as a large collective of brainless zombies who live and die by their loyalty to their regime. The term 'bhakt' has become a euphemism for a blind supporter of Modi. It is a label aggressively promoted and mainstreamed by the last few holdouts of the shunned elite savarna cultural machine.

However, the sycophantic, almost cult-like 'kill or be killed for the leader' political culture was not innovated by Modi. It in fact comes from the earlier generation of leaders like Nehru, and more particularly, Indira Gandhi, who are still held in high regard by the same savarna liberal elites who denounce Modi's 'bhakts'.

This sub-cohort of savarnas—the elite liberals who did not reinvent themselves and refuse to kowtow to Modi, and who continue to vaguely oppose his rustic, rough and unsophisticated persona—is perhaps the saddest group of them all. These are the savarnas who see themselves as social justice warriors (tapping into Western woke discourses), still clinging to some version of the liberal performance that once defined them as intellectual visionary leaders in the early 2010s. Many of their own peers have, in their own ways, embraced the India that Modi started building in 2014—some in a transparently sycophantic manner (like much of the news media), others through compliant self-discovery (like Ranveer), and still others through

grudging silence (like most of Bollywood).

The only remaining holdouts are this sub-cohort, who still imagine themselves as fighting, as the keepers of the 'soul of India'. They hold on to this notion even though most of their own families are now largely aligned with Modi's vision. These are the same families that have historically been deeply casteist and communal, and like the liberal warriors themselves, are not averse to gatekeeping material advantages and access for themselves, defeating any sense of commonwealth with the fellow citizens they claim to speak for—whom they typically view through a lens of condescending paternalism for being poor, or Muslim or 'lower' caste. By redefining the 'resistance' as an individual performance rather than linked to a larger family kinship network, and by repeatedly proclaiming their hatred for their own families' 'problematic views', this sub-cohort of elite savarnas has kept alive for itself this strange role as the moral custodians of the 'idea of India'.

However, even this performance is now fading and fatigued. The last great moment for this cohort was the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)–National Register of Citizens (NRC) mass movement in late 2019 and 2020. It was a great upsurge, led primarily by Muslims—many from highly marginalized backgrounds, especially women—with solidarity and support from several other sections of society. The bulk of this protest wave came from those below the glass floor, who transformed Shaheen Bagh from a low-income Delhi Muslim neighbourhood into a rallying cry for mobilizing resistance. The massive rallies that erupted and the numerous Shaheen Bagh-style protests that mushroomed across dozens of Indian cities were largely populated by these groups.

Some elite savarnas sincerely tried to do their bit—amplifying protests via Instagram and Twitter, showing up at protest sites—but large sections of their cohort either stayed away or remained silent. The entire period was tense, with the ever-present threat of state and police reprisal hanging in the air in a way that it never had before. Never in post-colonial India (except briefly during the peak of the Emergency) had the heart of the nation—its big, urban metropolitan centres, home to elite savarnas—been forced to contend with the raw brute violence of the state apparatus falling upon them. Even during the chaotic decades of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the full-frontal, naked

ferocity of the state was concentrated on the peripheries—in Kashmir, Assam, Nagaland, Punjab—never on the streets of Delhi, Bangalore or Mumbai.

The visceral immediacy of the Shaheen Baghs springing up in every major city brought that contradiction close to elite urban savarnas. Only a few stepped up, stepped out and stood in those spaces, while a larger section of the liberal, so-called Modi critics among elite savarnas quietly stayed away because of the risk of being picked up by police or being penalized by savarna bosses at work.

While public universities like JNU, Jamia Milia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University had already been flashpoints of violence, student protests and marches erupted in many other similar public institutions. Yet, elite savarna private universities remained disquietingly silent. Except for a handful of students or faculty here and there, all the radical talk, all the posturing about dissent and critical resistance disappeared into thin air. The overseas-educated savarna PhDs who were now professors in such private universities, went silent. These were the same folks who would earlier posture in classrooms as woke, social justice warriors, talking of the importance of resistance. Their savarna students, who had made their bodies a canvas for curating Tumblr-themed social justice and revolutionary artwork through piercings, tattoos and hairstyles, also disappeared. Instead, they huddled over coffee or in WhatsApp groups, lamenting the state of affairs, swapping stories of how their families were gleefully cheering police violence, and offering each other support and solidarity. Some might have visited a protest site once a month (in full riot-punk look), taken selfies and later visited a bar to drink beer, posting on social media with hashtags of ‘Inquilab’ alongside beer mugs. Most did not even do this bare minimum.

While the most marginalized were out on the streets, putting their livelihoods, careers and bodies on the line, elite savarna liberals locked themselves up inside their gated campuses and communities, peering out at the world through their social media handles, sometimes retweeting or posting stories, but nothing more. Meanwhile, their own families—erstwhile savarna liberals who, in the preceding decade, had reinvented themselves as development-oriented Modi-bhakts—shed their masks. There was a backlash from this Modi-oriented elite, who viewed the protests as essentially ‘anti-national’—

at best misguided, at worst part of a seditious conspiracy. There was no serious effort to push back against this narrative within the savarna sphere.

This pattern repeated during the anti-farm laws protests when (largely Jat) farmers from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh organized mass demonstrations on the outskirts of Delhi against laws that would have changed the agrarian political economy by allegedly shifting it into a (Bania) corporate-controlled centralized market that would squeeze the local (Jat) fief lords. Even as sections of BJP supporters tried to frame this as a Khalistani separatist conspiracy, the savarna liberals cheered from the sidelines—wanting these movements to succeed and embarrass Modi, but contributing little from their vast networks of accumulated caste privilege, for fear of reprisal and personal loss.

The CAA–NRC movement was ultimately overtaken by the unprecedented onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Indian government's response was a harsh lockdown, announced without warning. What followed was the crumbling of India's informal economy. Large sections of the urban labour force—the people below the glass floor—were left to fend for themselves. There was no state planning or apparatus with the vision or capacity to support its citizens. The nation watched in horror as tens of thousands walked on foot across state lines to their native villages because the cities they had come to work in had shut themselves down.

While this traumatic human migration was taking place, many elite savarnas were documenting their 'time at home' on social media—making reels about brewing dalgona coffee, joking about the 'silliness' of doing household chores themselves because their domestic help was no longer coming to work. Then frivolity gave way to horror. As COVID-19 deaths mounted and shortages of hospital beds and oxygen cylinders spiralled, even elite savarna social commentary descended into a mad, desperate Hail Mary plea for a miraculous solution to their predicament. For probably the first time, the scale of scarcity and the state's inability to provide resources caught up with even the most elite savarna families. Suddenly, knowing a minister or a top bureaucrat no longer ensured a solution, a hospital bed or an oxygen cylinder. The people below the glass floor, of course, had no expectations of such solutions to begin with. They lived and died

outside this gaze. Many made the news only because their bodies washed up on the banks of the Ganga.

The frustration and losses experienced by the elite savarnas during COVID-19 were real. Yet, in the aftermath, their response was interesting. Post the COVID-19 crisis, there was no mass mobilization —overt or covert—against the political systems that had failed to deliver, nor any outcry against the lack of a safety net even for their own families. Instead, they just picked up where they had left off before the pandemic, resuming a bizarre 'India is growing, developing and prospering' narrative, as if no other discursive imagination was available. Even the social-justice-performing sub-cohort of elite savarnas lacked the vision to address the structural violences that everything around them had just encountered. Instead, they went back to curating the issue of the month, flitting from environmental catastrophes to global geopolitical conflicts—always speaking in a shrill, preachy tone, never committing to a single cause, never raising stakes for themselves, but always walking tall like the moral custodians they imagined themselves to be.

In the years after 2020, particularly following the COVID-19 crisis, the elite savarna ecosystem appears bereft of any new vision or vitality. This was already a cohort living an isolated existence, materially cut off from large sections of their fellow citizenry. However, the pandemic years of being behind closed doors and in isolated spaces seem to have pushed them into a darker space—one of despondency, cynical nihilism and a cyclical repetition of older identity behavioural patterns.

All pretence of modernity appears to have been dropped. If at all such idioms and expressions continue, it is by rote and momentum of habit rather than genuine conviction. This elite savarna generational cohort of the late 1990s and early 2000s has shown no gumption, guts or grounding in reality to admit that India's national story has lost its way over the last twenty years (if at all it was on track to begin with). Instead, they have become increasingly short-tempered and irritable at any such suggestion. As discussed in Chapter 3 and here, many among them have taken to blaming the young and poor for being lazy and the marginalized for expecting handouts. At the same time, they have made a dramatic return to caste religiosity for comfort. Bhavish Aggarwal, the Bania founder and CEO of Ola, for instance, has been

suggesting that the concept of weekend holidays is a Western construct and in India, breaks traditionally occurred only once a month as per the lunar calendar.[37] Even as his business speaks to the future, with interests in electric vehicles and artificial intelligence, he promotes books written by right-wing Brahmanical thinkers in tweets. Increasingly cozying up to the government, he positions his tech products as examples of Indian success stories that can restore the nation to its past glory—the 'glory' being interpreted as a continuation of the Brahmanical imagination of an ancient golden era.[38]

This return to history can be read as a generational temper tantrum from the elite savarnas. Unable to meet their own goals, failing to lead national policy or discourse in any meaningful direction—either domestically or internationally—they have decided to sulk, blaming everyone else and taking refuge in modern interpretations of caste mythologies. In this, their core fragility is exposed. The collective inner psychosis of the elite dwij-savarna mentality has been laid bare.

The same folks who once mocked festivals, rituals and even native languages as backward in their teenage years are now overcompensating as havan-compliant traditionalists. They spend exorbitant amounts on vaastu consultants and pundits to advise on auspicious dates for every major event. In the era of IT and tech, they have even used these tools to create products and apps that facilitate these rituals. They send their children to expensive schools and universities that exclude caste-based affirmative action, and conduct courses and seminars on yoga, vegetarianism and culturally reassuring epics like the Ramayan and Mahabharat, reframing them as decolonizing pedagogical exercises.

The English-speaking elite savarnas who, in their youth, laughed at their parents and elders for watching religious satsangs on Aastha TV, have, as adults, turned with a vengeance to spiritual gurus for guidance and support. What starts as mental wellness measures quickly devolves into full-blown caste-religious conservativisms, where every ritual, practice and habit is justified as scientific and based on 'ancient knowledge'. This has started to reflect in their culture and art as well. As mentioned earlier, savarna cinema has retreated into the mythologies and neo-narratives of the old epics, even as the larger film industry collapses and cinema halls turn into museums of nostalgia, screening older films to remain commercially

viable.

This retreat into reassuring stories and fantasies—ones that elite savarnas in their youth would have mocked—is telling. If a hundred years ago, the Weimar Republic, as Kracauer observed, retreated into dark Expressionism, here, the elite savarnas dove headfirst into a revisionist mythological delusional fantasy.

After years of chasing MTV, VH1, the English music industry and Hollywood, elite savarna millennials have come back to 1990s and 2000s Shah Rukh Khan films, now hailing them as classics—when they once turned their noses up at the very same movies. After a decade of attempting to recreate US pop culture, Saturday Night Live-style comedy and late-night talk shows, elite savarna artists are transitioning from stand-up comedy, spoken poetry, metal rock and beatboxing to podcasting about the secrets of mythology and the existence of yetis and aliens.

However, as Ranveer himself discovered, this is no insurance or insulation. The audience aggregated on the back of this return to conservatism is not a soft, understanding one. It demands more 'purity' and does not forgive any transgressions. Appearing on comedian Samay Raina's internet show 'India Got Latent', Ranveer made an off-colour joke which skirted sex lives of one's parents and incest. The joke was in sync with the vibe of Samay Raina's 'edgy and dank' humour that his younger Gen Z audience (described in the next chapter) thrives on. Ranveer tried to fit in with this scene and erred greatly. He is not a Gen Z icon, his audience is older and conservative by his own curation and they would punish him for offending 'traditional' sensibilities. Within days, FIRs were filed. Ranveer issued an unconditional public apology and then disappeared from the public gaze for some time. He has since returned and vowed to 'do better' and bring more responsible content but his travails are an apt metaphor for the elite savarna millennials of his age. Having emerged in an era of possibilities and imagining themselves as cool vision leaders, they 'gharwapasi'-ed to spiritual caste conservatism as a succour only to be trapped within the very walls they took refuge in. Now as the walls close in, the elite savarna millennials appear without any imagination, vision or intellectual revival to respond in any meaningful way. They appear caught out. They appear lost and out of sync.

* * *

8.

Leaving India Behind: The Savarna Exodus

Much of this book has been a historical and cultural anthropology of elite savarnas in India over the past twenty-five years or so. It reflects on this period, traces its roots by gazing back at earlier time periods and spends much of its pages analysing—or as many savarna reviewers will likely allege, ranting in broad, sweeping generalizations about—the cultural trends of the era. However, as we reach the end of this book, we must look ahead to what is coming next. Where does it all go from here? What does the bright future hold for the savarna cultural–industrial complex? Will India truly become a global superpower by 2047? Does India transform into a Valhalla of glass, steel and bullet trains?

The direction in which these answers are moving now seems obvious. The elite savarna cohort that was positioning itself as the sherpa guiding this journey to superpower status appears to be running away from the very society it was meant to transform.

India, along with China, sends more students overseas to North America and Europe than any other country. In 2022, the UK Home Office released a report indicating that one-third of all study-sponsored grants in UK higher education institutions went to Indian students.[39] This was the highest among all nationalities.

Indian students are a hyper-visible overseas minority on campuses in Canada, USA, UK, Germany, Australia and New Zealand. Every year, lakhs go overseas for higher studies, flooding undergraduate to doctoral vacancies. However, unlike Chinese students, almost all the Indian students going abroad come from the same hyper-minority social cohort of elite savarnas. For many of them, studying abroad is the natural culmination of the years spent in the pipeline of super-premium institutions. As mentioned before (Chapter 4), the very point

of these institutions is to game the academic playing field in ways that gives tremendous advantages to already privileged kids. However, the pedagogical thrust of such systems produces students who are servile, isolated and alienated within their individualized mental prisons. The entire purpose of elite savarna education has become about conforming to set archetypes so as not to complicate future career pathways, which inevitably circle back to overseas emigration.

In the last chapter, I discussed the collapse of the performative critical leadership that elite savarnas postured through the late 2000s and early 2010s. Much of this collapse (and the rapid pace at which it has happened) can be attributed to the corrosive hollowing out of the education and intellectual set-up.

Since the days of the BJP's first national government under Vajpayee in the late 1990s, elite liberal savarnas have been raising alarms at the 'saffronization' of textbooks and curricula. However, some alarms should also have been raised about the 'intern-ification' of education. Every curriculum, every academic programme across institutions began to be assessed through the singular lens of corporate compatibility—which, as we have also covered at length, under Bania leadership shrank into narrow, non-innovative, self-serving business models.

A consequence of this has been the gradual shrinking of even the modicum of critical defiance that once existed in savarna circles. As already covered, this was most transparently visible during the CAA–NRC movement, the COVID-19 crisis, etc., where, barring a few committed individuals, there was no mass mobilization from elite savarnas in solidarity with the marginalized.

Ambedkarites have also pointed out that hardly any elite savarna mass movement appeared in solidarity during the protests against the barbaric rape and murder of a young SC girl by Thakur strongmen in Hathras, UP, and the forcible cremation of her body by the police.[40] Some savarnas added #DalitLivesMatter to their social media bios, but little else happened. Even this gesture seemed influenced by the 'Black Lives Matter' movement in the US, which erupted that same summer, despite COVID-19, in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of US police officers. As scores of white progressives added #BlackLivesMatter to their bios, English-speaking elite savarnas, ever keen to adopt and localize white idioms as cultural performance,

eagerly added ‘Dalit Lives Matter’ to their vocabulary. The whole exercise appeared like a means to escape scrutiny and wash off any associated caste guilt at the time of a crisis.

Let us consider the example of Faye D’Souza, a journalist popular with savarna audiences for her feminist stance and outspoken nature. Initially, she framed the Hathras violence as a broad, patriarchal and gendered aggression, using her wide-reaching social media presence (where she has been active since leaving TV news at Mirror Now in 2019). The problem with social media, however, is that the audience can talk back. And they did. Faye was called out and ratioed for ignoring the ‘caste angle’ of the Hathras story. She apologized and vowed to do more. Soon after, she did an episode featuring three Dalit women activists and intellectuals—Kiruba Munusamy, Divya Malhari and Cynthia Stephen. The guests made impassioned pleas for the mainstreaming of Dalit women’s voices. Faye appeared humble and pledged to do more.

The episode, streamed live on 1 October 2020, became a part of her #PassTheMic series, aimed at mainstreaming oppressed caste voices. Within a month, she invited three more guests—Suraj Yengde, Yashica Dutt and Grace Banu who spoke about their lived experience with caste. However, after the initial furore and scrutiny died down, so did her series. At the time of writing, four years later, neither Kiruba nor Divya have appeared again on Faye’s show, nor did any other anti-caste thinkers or activists have the mic passed to them. Only Cynthia was invited for another round of commentary a year later. Meanwhile, Faye continues to host her show as an outspoken online journalist with high profile guests and almost 3.4 lakh subscribers on YouTube. Was her month-long commitment to platforming caste issues essentially a response to her brand being scrutinized for caste blindness by her elite savarna audiences? Once the latter moved on, so did her editorial interest and priorities it would seem.

Older Ambedkarites recall similar instances of indifferent or performative elite savarna virtue-signalling during past mass movements, such as the protests following Rohith Vemula’s institutional murder in 2016 or the national strike of April 2018 led by SC and ST groups against the dilution of the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. The savarna disregard for the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, the 2006 Singur violence and the COVID-19 migrant crisis

has already been covered at length. Be it the 2006 Khairlanji caste massacre, the beef-related lynchings since 2014, the north-east Delhi riots of 2020, the never-ending (yet entirely avoidable) student suicides in premier institutions and the deaths of sewage cleaners forced to do manual scavenging—nothing seems to shake the ennui and tepid, bland 'condemnation-performance' from elite savarnas as a collective.

It would seem that, in the last twenty-five years, apart from the anti-corruption movement of 2012 and the 2006 anti-OBC reservation 'Youth for Equality' movement, elite savarnas have never truly been moved by anything to protest en mass on the streets. These interventions, along with the earlier 1990 anti-reservation protests against the Mandal Commission's OBC quota, found the sympathetic gaze of the savarna cultural machinery, much of whose top media, academia and civil society advocates broadly endorsed the fervour of their youth (even if not wholeheartedly supporting their goals in public). Though these movements were inherently anti-democratic—aimed at denying the few, hard-fought social justice policies benefiting the vast masses below the glass floor—the elite savarnas framed their youth as righteous. Opposing caste-based reservation in education and employment is a generations-long propaganda agenda pursued by elite savarnas, so this was understandable.

The 2012 'anti-corruption' movement itself simplified the political economy of corruption to villainize comic-book-style politicians. The deep-seated elite savarna disgust towards marginalized caste and 'rustic' political assertion was reframed as righteous aggression—many even began arguing that the right to vote should only be given to the educated. Arvind Kejriwal, the 'hero of 2012', was seen as a credible and genuine political leader because he was an IIT-educated politician—the unspoken implication being that politicians like behenji Mayawati or Lalu Yadav were unreliable, uneducated opportunists. Even the fact that the very leaders they vilified were already highly educated did not deter savarna righteousness.

Savarna film-makers Vinay Shukla and Khushboo Ranka made a documentary on the rise of Kejriwal, *An Insignificant Man*, which was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, the BFI London Film Festival and the Busan International Film Festival. Years later, Shukla would go on to make another high-profile film on Brahman

journalist Ravish Kumar (Pandey), *While We Watched*, which framed the latter as a heroic voice of reason, resistance and rebellion during the Modi years. It is strange how none of these savarna artists ever seemed to find inspiration in any resistance, mobilization or challenge that lay outside their dwij circles. It is almost as if Babasaheb was correct—every caste is a nation unto itself—and for the dwij nations, only their own interests and icons are 'visible' for inspiration and creative imagination.

During the early period of the BJP victory of 2014, JNU students like Kanhaiya Kumar became the darlings of the liberal elite savarna sub-cohort, who saw in them voices of resistance. Savarna comedians like Kunal Kamra and other cultural figures helped build the legend of Kanhaiya as a young communist voice standing up to Modi.

This was happening in parallel to the Ambedkarite movements springing forth after Rohith Vemula's institutional murder at the University of Hyderabad. Every year, India loses hundreds, if not thousands, of its talented youth to suicides in educational institutions or while preparing for entrance exams in coaching concentration camps like those in Kota, Rajasthan. Activist Anoop Kheri and the Insight Foundation team made a documentary series, *Death of Merit* (still available for free on YouTube), detailing the cold-blooded murder of gifted SC and ST students in India's premier educational institutions in 2011. Yet, there was no elite savarna outrage, introspection or even interest in the matter.

The focus was on performatively role-playing cultural wars. Elite savarna youth in elite universities saw themselves as the vanguard of resistance against the fascist aggression of the RSS. In their heads, perhaps they were role-playing fantasies of fighting Nazis during campus elections and on comment threads online. But after graduation, this edge disappeared quickly. Most settled for regular jobs within the savarna corporate set-up, including the increasingly privatized and corporatized higher education and social work sectors.

Even the great rebel icons from the class of 2016 have shifted their positions. Kanhaiya Kumar is no longer a communist. He is a prominent Congress leader presently, but as a Bhumihar from Bihar, he may one day even pivot to the BJP. His comrade, Shehla Rashid, is already aligned with the very party she once labelled communal fascists. Only poor Umar Khalid remains in prison. At the time of

writing, he has been incarcerated for over four years, with his bail hearings routinely adjourned. Elite savarnas occasionally post tweets or stories about Umar, but for the most part, everyone has moved on with their lives. Many of his own savarna peers have completed their PhDs and are now professors in India and overseas, with seemingly far more influence and agency—yet, in a familiar pattern, no action seems forthcoming from the elite savarna collective.

In the post-COVID-19 era, the elite savarna sphere seems bereft of ideas, icons and ideological direction. They had framed the anti-reservation movements of 1990 and 2006 as righteous in the name of saving 'merit', and the 2012 anti-corruption movement—which indirectly killed marginalized caste mobilizations—as 'morally' just for democracy. Their broad non-engagement with the Rohith Vemula agitation, the 2018 national strike and the 2020 Hathras protests was consistent with their pattern of sitting out caste justice movements.

However, their lack of engagement with the CAA–NRC movement of 2019–2020 exposed them to their own contradictions. Unlike the aforementioned examples, it was in this latter movement that many elite savarnas realized the true extent of bigotry within their own families and social systems. Many were embarrassed by their families, friends and peers; many more were embarrassed by themselves. For the first time, this generational cohort faced its own limitations, its own moral failings. In the aftermath of the 'Dalit Lives Matter' moment, the CAA–NRC movement and the COVID-19 crisis, many elite savarnas began, for the first time, to see themselves as mediocre, self-serving elites—not just incapable of being part of the solution, but rather the problem itself.

2

Since its independence from British colonial rule, India has witnessed two competing strands of savarna claims to power. The masses below the glass floor were given no say in this. Above it, there was fierce competition between two sections of savarna Brahmanism. Gandhi, the Bania hero of the anti-colonial movement, removed himself from consideration for leading the newly emergent state, passing the honour to the younger Brahman dynast, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru's legacy varies widely in the present estimation based on the

analytical point of view. His admirers (of whom there are many, even beyond the Congress party his family has persevered with) regard him as a big-hearted idealist, a dreamer, an institution-builder, a global statesman, magnanimous and gentle—a giant of history who shaped and nurtured the young republic through its tumultuous early years. His detractors (of whom there are many as well, from Ambedkarites to the RSS to the left) saw him as an out-of-touch elite who styled himself as a neo-nawab of Delhi and presented himself as an erudite, charismatic gentleman but could become a petulant bully and heavy-handed autocrat in the blink of an eye. Nehru, the person, was a bit of both without question. However, more importantly, in the context of this narrative, he was certainly the architect of India in its foundational years.

His grand infrastructure projects—from big dams to new cities like Chandigarh—were not the result of decentralized public consultation and democratic discussion. They were handed down from New Delhi as directives. The political culture of centralizing power within the party and the national centre, and the curation of public institutions, private enterprise and civil society through direct and indirect influence were all habits that became woven into the DNA of the new Indian nation. In many ways, this was the continuation of the Congress party's own political anthropology as a mass organization that was central to the anti-colonial movement. Much of the 'Nerhuvian' culture carried over into the nature of institutions and influence the party built in the new republic.

Within the next few decades, this culture had atrophied into a crony-savarna-kinship network of gatekeeping. All academic, media, civil society, judicial, policy, artistic, literary and cultural institutions and spaces were occupied by elite savarnas who knew each other—and whose next of kin were also slotted into the system through requests, references and adjustments. This virtually closed off avenues for original ideas, fresh thinking or different points of view based on differing lived realities. India's intellectual and cultural apparatus began rotting from the inside. Innovation was not visible unless it came from those hand-picked by the elite savarna coteries. Ambition was not rewarded, and only a tiny section of elite savarnas were regarded as the all-knowing, all-intelligent patrons of society.

Contrary to this Nehruvian formation—which depended on regional

political satraps to deliver electoral power—the RSS had, over decades, built a more grounded movement. This was a movement of caste-conservative Brahman idealists who were prepared to play the long game of grassroots realpolitik. Unlike the elite savarna cohort, this section did not inherit or occupy the institutions left behind by the British or created during the years of Nehruvian earnestness. Instead, they operated outside this framework. Much of the RSS footprint spread via hyperlocal outreach that connected regional Brahman, Bania, Thakur and other savarna fiefs not aligned with the Congress.

Around this network, they built a core movement privileging Brahmanism as a unifying identity framework while also fostering the othering of non-south Asian religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. The missteps of the Congress in the 1980s—particularly its infamous Doon cabinet—squandered political space to this carefully built mass movement. By the time Rajiv Gandhi unlocked the locks at the Babri complex, the movement had matured enough to seize the initiative.

Unencumbered by the burden of building a broad social coalition to stay in power, the BJP could aggressively capitalize on positioning itself as the party for Hindu rights. Many sections of educated, elite savarnas despised it for this stance. However, by the late 1990s, the BJP was in power at the centre, emerging as a truly national savarna alternative to the Congress. This, along with the growing assertion of the Bahujan movement and the spectre of Mayawati's rising influence on regional and national politics, caused many elite savarnas to look for a new messiah. As explained in the previous chapter, it was eventually Modi who rose through these tumultuous years and grabbed the brass ring, headlining himself as the great savarna consensus consolidator.

Thus, the great Brahman-savarna friendly 'civil war' has played out over the last two and half decades. Now, as this great churning fades, both savarna imaginations appear exhausted.

I have already talked about the fizzling out of the 'critical' elite savarnas, but even the 'conservative' faction seems to be losing steam. Post 2014, the RSS-affiliated savarna groups have reshaped much of the Indian nation according to their core agenda. The Ram Mandir has been built and inaugurated in Ayodhya, which, along with Varanasi, is

undergoing major urban renewal as a showcase of the regime. With the abrogation of Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir may now be technically considered an 'integral' part of India.

Aggressive vegetarianism is increasingly becoming state policy, the othering of Muslims from social, cultural and economic activities has gained pace and the robust political mobilization of marginalized castes (derisively called 'Mandal politics') has been co-opted and defeated. Yoga has been mainstreamed, the 'ashramization' of education is underway and tribal and oppressed caste groups are increasingly being folded under the Sanatan Dharma umbrella. Meanwhile, cinema and literature have swung back strongly towards Brahmanical mythologies and ultra-nationalism.

Yet, despite this, there is no great momentum towards the future—no great conviction, vision or belief that the Indian nation is poised for a great take-off in the coming years, as many had felt during the early 2000s.

The 2024 general election saw a rejection of the remaining agenda points of the conservative savarna faction. The rewriting of the Constitution, the removal or dilution of caste-based affirmative action for SCs, STs and OBCs, the formalization of India as 'Bharat' under a 'Hindu rashtra' and fanning the fantasy of 'Akhand Bharat'—were all widely rejected by large sections of the electorate, taking the wind out of Modi's campaign. Though he returned as prime minister, the message was clear: the masses below the glass floor needed welfare support, not fantasies of greatness. The mandate was to extend, not dilute, state guarantees.

The Congress-led Opposition, which considered the election result as a moral victory, soon found out in the immediate Haryana and Maharashtra state elections afterwards that the voters could not be taken for granted. Mere rhetoric was not going to cut it. Unless the promises for more social and economic guarantees were carried out, unless electoral representation for marginalized castes was increased, unless the caste census and resultant social justice measures were enforced, the votes would shift to whichever side appeared more committed to these demands. In Haryana particularly, the Congress's focus on Jat leadership alienated the non-Jat and Dalit voters who voted for the BJP—the very party they had rejected mere months ago in the national elections. Caste, welfare and demonstrable political

intent became front and centre of electoral politics. When Kejriwal got voted out of Delhi after two sweeping mandates—much of it boiled down to BJP saying they would not discontinue the welfare programmes of AAP. Even though many voters acknowledged the good work done by Kejriwal, they made it clear that they were not beholden to his legacy and opted for a hassle-free government. AAP's insistence on not letting leadership grow from Dalit and Muslim ranks especially seemed to backfire as the predominantly Bania–Brahman party discovered that the electorate has entered a new phase of hard bargain. Just sending out welfare sops or declaring token gestures of representation were not enough. They were running out of patience. For the first time since Chandrababu Naidu introduced the phantasm of 'development' as a winning buzzword in the 1990s, elections as big-budget marketing campaigns selling bombastic oratory have failed.

The material scarcity has caught up with the patience of the masses below the glass floor. The very group that elite savarnas in the 2000s called 'risk averse' and 'sceptical' has shown political pragmatism, calling the bluff on three decades of development dreams that have benefited no one except elite savarnas, who have since locked themselves away behind the high walls of their gated communities and institutions while frantically trying to escape India by emigrating.

No elite savarna wants to raise the next generation in India. Most are in the process of sending their children abroad through schools, universities and programmes customized for this purpose. They are winding up capital and divesting investments to ensure they no longer need to materially exist within India. Many are in some stage of applying for permanent residency or citizenship in Canada, the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere.

In late 2004, Shah Rukh Khan starred in *Swades*, playing a Brahman scientist working at NASA in the US who returns to India to dedicate his labour and mind to affect social change, forgoing a more lucrative and prestigious career overseas. The film's naïve social politics aside, its idealism represented an era when savarna NRIs wanted to (and many did) return to India to build, shape and transform her. However, confronted with the enormity of the challenges, that idealism has retreated from these shores. There is now only a mad scramble to escape the ship as it is sinking. And thus the great savarna exodus from India gathers pace every year.

That brings us to the elite savarna Gen Z, children of the generation that once saw itself as the transformers of India—but ultimately fumbled the ball and is now scrambling for a face-saving exit, complaining and whining along the way.

I have spent the last decade teaching this Gen Z group in elite, private liberal arts universities. It has not been a wholesome or positive experience.

Born in gated communities, educated in isolating premium schools, existing only within the tiny islands of affluence that savarnas have created for themselves amid the vast oceans of heaving poverty and swaying precarity that are our major cities, this youth grew up largely inside the walls of their homes. They were taught early to retreat into their screens by parents, for many of whom the digital interface began as a helpful parenting ally. As a result of the parental instinct to protect children from the horrors of the world, much of the elite savarna Gen Z grew up very sheltered, almost to the point of alienation. So much so that by adolescence, they frequently heard not just from parents, but also from teachers, family elders and various other adult figures that they were ‘spoilt’ and ‘soft’.

This generation was shaped during the peak churn between two savarna cultural systems—one pulling towards Modi’s vision, the other positioning itself as deeply critical of it. The kids learned both languages while committing to neither.

More than anyone else, elite savarna Gen Z instinctively understood that in a caste society, identity is a performance. It is cosplay. You could be a necromaniac alien one moment, and a costume change later, you could be a sword-wielding samurai elder from medieval Japan. You could be anything and everything, all at once. This was a generation that made itself a mannequin. A hanger to hang clothes on. Change the clothes, change the look, change the personality and change the person.

Cut off from the material mainstream of Indian society, this youth has never encountered the people below the glass floor. They did not play with them in parks or streets, sit with them in classrooms or go to their homes for festivals and celebrations. By and large, they stayed indoors, learning culture from the insipid, milquetoast banalities of

their parents' preoccupations.

Raised as 'English-speakers' from birth by their status-conscious, educated elite savarna parents, they also inherited the savarna fixation with internalizing and mirroring white cultural vocabulary. At the time Gen Z was learning this vocabulary, white American culture was going through a period where performative identity politics was peaking. The polarizing nature of that politics has since wrecked the US social fabric. Even in that sphere, the defeat of Kamala Harris in the presidential elections, paving the way for an ominous second Trump presidency, signals a fatigue with performative political posturing.

Regardless, savarna Gen Z has taken the shrill US woke politics and merged it with their inherent dwij caste-based'knowledge performing/ validating' impulses. The result is a hyper-aggressive online persona, cloaked behind alt-IDs and anonymous handles, always lurking with the energy of an impatient lynch mob.

The ultra-safety of their upbringing and their disconnect from the material realities around them have seemingly created a schizophrenic split identity. In person, many of these teenagers and young adults struggle with crippling anxiety and lack the capacity to socialize beyond their social class circles. Yet, as mentioned earlier, they have mastered identity cosplay and perform it with remarkable dexterity, especially online. On LinkedIn, for instance, they can curate a very corporate persona, discussing machine learning and corporate ethics, presenting themselves as industry-oriented, internship-ready youth. At the same time, on their anon alt-IDs, they rage against the very same corporates for being blood-sucking entities and post 'Eat the Rich' memes. Both these personas and many more can coexist in complete harmony without any irony or dissonance.

However, as time passes and the more identities they hop, a nihilistic boredom grows within the elite savarna Gen Z. Nothing shocks them since nothing truly stirs within their antiseptic, sterilized living circles. Meanwhile, in their online worlds, even outrage is a rehearsed performance. They have learnt how to manipulate their elders and authority figures, and when caught, they know how to wriggle out—by plotting and playing every available tactic with a cynical coldness that would shock even some weary millennial savarnas if they knew the true extent of Gen Z culture. Increasingly,

elite savarna Gen Z—especially boys—retreat into chasing ever edgier content. Addicted to saying the most vile, shocking and outrageous things because nothing else evokes an authentic reaction or consequence, we are left watching a youth that is slowly hollowing out from the inside, right before our eyes. An innocence lost, a generation of splintering identities, existing in interchangeable fractions—all falling headlong away from India and into the international cities and societies they were seemingly bred and trained to ultimately exist in.

Around 2017, a small elite savarna millennial-led narrative emerged, applauding the Gen Z cohort. The phrase 'The kids are alright', borrowed from an old song by The Who, began appearing in social media posts and commentaries as an indulgent, well-meaning compliment from adults who wanted to see the best in the generation coming up behind them. Many savarnas were impressed by Gen Z's confidence in public speaking, by the performed conviction of their activism and by the number of iconic books, music, films and other cultural markers they casually referenced.

However, the same teens who were posting critical memes against queerphobia, Donald Trump and the BJP in India ended up posting reels celebrating the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, while sharing religious and caste-themed content in a tone of brazen pride that would even shock many centrist savarna conservatives of an older vintage.

For many in this elite young generation, whose education has been geared towards overseas citizenship and consuming the media of international elites, any meaningful, contextual understanding of Indian realities is difficult. They have grown up blind to the large masses around and 'below' them. To the savarna Gen Z, the glass floor beneath their feet is made of opaque, opulent marble. To them, the basement, where the large mass of India lives, may as well be a tomb where they have been sealed in. The fact that it can explode and spill into their lives in ways that they are unprepared to cope with does not dawn on them. That world is inaccessible to them, which is why they have revolutionary fantasies but never with any meaningful agenda—always a perennial cosplay.

They posture as radicals, yet tolerate and cooperate with the ridiculous and authoritarian rules imposed by the private schools and

colleges they attend. Rules that even today no public institution can get away with. Within these ‘elite institutes’ the elite savarna Gen Z is willing to subject themselves to CCTV camera scrutiny, breathalysers, body cameras, physical frisking and are happy to pay fines for holding hands or kissing a person of interest. Yet in their anonymous online avatars, they demand zero tolerance and 100 per cent accountability for the cause of their choice.

It is a generation that has truly checked out of India—mentally and metaphysically. They remain here only in physical, corporeal form—isolating themselves in bubbles, bouncing from international-curriculum schools, to private liberal arts universities, to dating apps, to social media, to cafés and clubs, to ‘flea markets’ for thrifting fashion looks, till ultimately they can exit the borders of this nation, and come home to whichever ‘First World’ country will accept them. They do not live here—perhaps they never truly did. They have left our country. Only the immigration visa remains to be stamped.

4

So in the end, here stands savarna India in 2025—a bloated, underperforming economy that has failed to create jobs or income growth for the vast majority of its citizens. The social (caste) elites—who, as ‘experts’, called the shots unquestioned for the last twenty-five to thirty years—are now fleeing the land. Their next generation lies utterly alienated, locked in nihilistic mental prisons.

Only in certain neighbourhoods of India’s top metropolitan cities has the elite savarna empire taken root. In Gurgaon; south Delhi; Koramangala, Whitefield and Indiranagar in Bengaluru; Mylapore and Tharamani in Chennai; Baner, Aundh and Hinjewadi in Pune; BKC, Worli, Juhu and ‘SoBo’ in Mumbai; Park Street, Southern Avenue, Alipur and New Town in Kolkata; Hitech City, Jubilee and Banjara Hills in Hyderabad; C.G. Road and Bopal in Ahmedabad—and all such elite neighbourhoods—one can spot the remnants of the elite savarna dream. The fantasy of a corporate, caste-supremacist society where Starbucks co-exists with caste- and communally-segregated living and labour forces, where apps ease petty commercial transactions while social development indices of the entire community nosedive.

However, even at its peak, at its best, the contradictions and cracks

in this system are impossible to ignore. In each such neighbourhood, property prices—both for renting and owning—have skyrocketed to absurd levels. Sections of premium real estate now exist as no-occupancy, tax-management investments of the ultra-rich. Meanwhile, the cities surrounding these enclaves are becoming unliveable—choked by traffic congestion and overcrowding, suffering from poor urban planning and pollution. Much of this crisis is due to the massive savarna capital collusion in policymaking, exacerbated by thoughtless and selfish business and planning decisions.

Air pollution is becoming unbearable. What was once only a post-Diwali crisis in Delhi has now become a year-round catastrophe—not just in Delhi, but also Mumbai and Bengaluru. If trends hold, this will soon be the story of every major Indian city. Not to mention the harsh Indian summers, exacerbated by poor urban planning, where glass-and-steel buildings create suffocating heat islands where even air-conditioning units start failing. To escape the scorching plains, the elite demand broad highways and luxury hotels in hill stations, accelerating landslides and environmental collapses in the fragile Himalayan landscape. Ocean fronts are also getting choked—Goa now has a surplus tourism problem.

Meanwhile, India's business czars have failed to create or innovate a new type of society. Entry-level IT wages have stagnated for over a decade. The start-up bubble has popped without leading to any consumer revolution. Companies like Ola, which styled themselves as nationalist alternatives to global MNCs, are struggling with customer complaints. The much-vaunted Indian aviation sector is teetering—Jet Airways and Go Air have folded, SpiceJet is suffering severe crisis, IndiGo and Air India face routine customer backlash. The whole system is straining at its edges.

The future looks bleak. Beyond the savarna bubble, the masses beneath the glass floor are growing impatient. The ever-shrinking public sector recruitments—especially in railways, defence and paramilitary forces, once a crucial social safety net—have already resulted in mass unrest among non-elite youth. This unrest will only intensify unless economic solutions are found. That requires a form of social engineering that elite savarnas have shown themselves either incapable of or unwilling to undertake (or both).

As the collective looks beyond elite savarnas for answers, maybe a

return to the caste-marginalized politics of the 1970s–1990s lies ahead. As both the liberal and conservative factions of savarna political mobilizations run out of steam, as the elites flee India, the country's future may, by default, fall into the hands of those below the glass floor. Maybe that is what 'Viksit Bharat' in 2047 looks like.

* * *

Postscript: A Pseudo Epilogue

I imagine a future—twelve to fifteen years down the road. By then, the elite savarna exodus will be mostly complete. They are a hyper-minority to begin with, so emigration in such high numbers will quickly erode their base. The elite savarnas of Pakistan and Bangladesh have already left, resettling in the UK, the Middle East and the US. India is one of the last bastions in south Asia where this great exodus of the elites is still pending.

Yet, even though they will leave, their stranglehold on culture, discourse and political economy will persist. Their material assets will be redistributed in ways that prevent any meaningful shift in the socio-economic spectrum. If at all a marginalized leader is elevated to the top and tries to reset it, the cultural machine will denounce and decry them as blasphemous and revisionist. Latin American democracies are full of such examples, where expat and international agendas supersede grassroots mobilizations. India, perhaps, will be no different.

Some cultural markers will remain. On Diwali, for instance, one can imagine elite savarnas returning to India—rushing to their expansive, suburban farmhouses, where they will host parties, inviting the few elites left behind. Maybe my friend Kulkarni, whom we met at the beginning of this book, will be there. A few drinks in, they will lament the 'missed opportunity' to make India great—how their generation almost did it, but were thwarted by the narrow political interests and politics of the 'masses'. This, of course, will be a lie, but collectively told, it will be reassuring, and over time, even become the truth.

Some second-generation savarna graduate from a Sonipat liberal arts college will eventually write a book about the tragic endeavour of the 'lost generation that tried to reshape India against its own will and failed gloriously'. That book will be circulated as the truth and discussed in such Diwali parties. The mood will turn sombre. In reposte, Kulkarni will perhaps refer to my book as an example of the self-defeating, self-sabotaging narrative that led to the demise of the

great Indian dream. Everyone will sadly agree.

Then the DJ will play 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' from *Dil Se*, and everyone will forget their travails, political positions and jetlag. They will join in unison, headbanging to the beat. I imagine there will also be a projection system. As Sukhwinder Singh's voice rises to a crescendo and Shah Rukh Khan falls to his knees and bobs his head, the entire gathering of elite savarnas will do the same. They will know the lyrics and will be singing them out loud, collectively, almost in a trance.

But while they bob their heads in celebration and ecstasy, they will be far removed from the way we, the Bahujan, the many, the people below the glass floor have seen the world.

Maybe it is better that way.

* * *

Acknowledgements

Books get published all the time. It's just ink on pages. We attach too much importance to it. But if at all it has any significance, I would first acknowledge my debt to dearest Bijal, who has always been such a massive support and put me in touch with the wonder-agent, Kanishka (Kan). My gratitude also to Chirag, who sought me out organically on social media and commissioned me because he thought I had an interesting voice and something original to say. A major shoutout also to my editors, especially Nikita, who has endured my passive-aggressive responses with a professionalism that I seek to internalize someday. Thanks also to Aakriti and the artwork of Anand to take my rant of a pitch and make it into a passable book cover. I hope they all understand the absolute garbage mediocrity they have now knowingly mainstreamed.

I owe, of course, the greatest debt to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. The more I read his scholarship, the more I am stunned into inaction by the scope of his vision and intellectual range. I also owe this work to the pioneering and tireless intellectual and political work of Saheb Kanshiram—a true nation-builder, whose contribution should have been honoured with statues, fellowships and entire departments (if not universities) named after him. But I guess we should not dream too highly.

Much of my lens for viewing 'dwij savarnas' as an ethnographic cohort comes from the incisive work of my beloved bhau, Anoop Kheri. A true giant of the Ambedkarite grassroots movement and India's 'best teacher', my deep gratitude to him.

I would also like to acknowledge the pioneering work of another (now somewhat polarizing) icon, Professor Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, whose book *Why I am not a Hindu* was among the first works that broke me free from the binds of a caste-religious framework. I am indebted to his 'Buffalo Nationalism', to which I owe the name of my social media alter-ego, 'Buffalo Intellectual'.

Speaking of 'Buffalo Intellectual'—what began as a small rant page

which I never expected to reach more than 300–400 people, now has tens of thousands of followers, well-wishers and subscribers. It is a community, many of whom are savarnas, whose love and support in the face of my acerbic critiques has kept me humbled, soft and from turning bitter. Thank you my sweet, mentally unwell Buffaloholics!

Thanks also to my editors in various platforms I have contributed essays and op-eds to. Special mention to Rohitha, who commissioned me to do the *Like a Savarna* series for Swaddle and stuck with me when the first piece, 'Dating Like a Savarna', received massive flak from savarna reactionaries. Shoutout also to the Ambedkarite student community and organizations, who celebrated my work increasingly as savarnas critiqued it. Thank you and Jai Bhim to all my friends at ASA, BAPSA and student organizations carrying forward Babasaheb's caravan.

I would also like to acknowledge the endless love and loyalty I have received from Nilesh, my brother Shubham, Chandu, Susheel bhau, Minto, Durga, Rahul Baudh and the Nalanda family—thank you all for holding me together through the periods of my life when I thought I lost myself.

Preeti, who I have known through the versions of myself long since dead. Oindrila, for always checking on me (more than my family ever has). My divas—Ankita, Manasi Goyal, Anagha—for being the sociopaths who indulge my rants. My dear friend, 'Anurag Minus Verma'—I do not know a sharper intellect who can read savarna culture like a tapestry; so much of my analysis comes from his commentary. Thank you all.

I also owe my steadfast champion Aparna an ice cream (or two) for putting up with me. I know no one else who would be so cool, nonchalant and yet so involved simultaneously.

Pooja, Bibi, Kalpana, Pratiksha, Manish, Prem and all the other domestic help over the cities and years I have been blessed to work with in maintaining my household—you may never read this, but I remember you. And I am grateful for your intervention in my life for the inadequate wages I could afford.

Mathew, my teacher, my friend—thank you for coming into my life. You were the magic that transformed me from a gutter rat to something resembling a scholar. Your gift to my life is immeasurable —I owe you my voice.

This wouldn't be complete without a nod to my beloved cat, my lovely Kutkut. Her patient vigilance over my writing kept this project on track.

I must end by mentioning Kutkut's ardent well-wisher—my amazing niece, my sweet monkey, Shagun. A huge part of writing this was so that one day, she could own it and find bits of her own self through these words.

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Ebury Press

Ebury Press is an imprint of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Published by Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd
4th Floor, Capital Tower 1, MG Road,
Gurugram 122 002, Haryana, India

First published in Ebury Press by Penguin Random House India 2025

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This digital edition published in 2025.
eISBN: 9789367905586

www.penguin.co.in